

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a young man and woman in school uniforms. The man, with blonde hair and green eyes, is pointing at an open book held by the woman. The woman has long black hair and blue eyes. They are surrounded by stacks of books and floating papers. The title text is overlaid on the bottom half of the image.

Micoto Sakurai

III Kuroyuki

A Royal Rebound:

*Forget My
Ex-Fiancé,* I'm Being

Pampered
by the Prince

1



Micoto Sakurai
ill. Kuroyuki



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Kuroyuki



"Just stop it already.
It's my fault for not
being able to love
you, Sarah has done
nothing wrong."

**Reese
Thurma**

Amelia's fiancé. After
enrolling in the Royal
Academy of Magic,
he got in love with a
partner.

"I'm sorry, Reese...
This is all my fault..."

Sarah Caria

Reese's partner.
She believes what
she and Reese have
is true love.

Sarge

The fourth prince of the
Kingdom of Indulgit.
An eccentric who
enjoies subjects
like botany.

"I wish to speak to you
further, but I have
some business I must
attend to at the castle.
I apologize, but I'll
take my leave here."

"No, it's no trouble
at all. Thank you for
accompanying me
this far. I had a lot of
fun dancing."

**Amelia
Lenia**

Account's daughter
from a noble
domain.



Meena Eded

The second daughter
of Count Eded and
Kaid's younger sister.
An earth mage.

"You are forbidden
to approach His
Highness without
permission."

Kaid Eded

A stern knight tasked
with keeping track
of Sump. He has
his work cut out
for him.

Julius

The Kingdom of
Dorodol's Third
Prince. Specializes
in water magic.

"In order to
ascertain the
truth, I will use
reenactment
magic."

Marie Edori

Amelia's friend,
a reliable upper-
classman.

"It will be an excellent
environment in which one
can study magic. I'm
trying my hardest to get
into the Special A class."

"It's a pleasure
to meet you,
Miss Amelia.
Thank you for
always looking
after my older
brother."

“I don’t need any top-notch
facilities or piles of books.
All I need is you.”

Those were his true feelings—he was
able to express them freely now that
it was just the two of them alone in
this room. He depended on her.

“If you say something like
that, you’re going to give
me the wrong idea.”

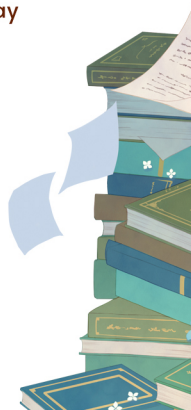




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Prologue: An Unsettling Spring

It was spring, the year before last.

Amelia, the only daughter of Count Lenia, was walking through the farmland alongside Reese, to whom she had been engaged since she was a child. The vast farmland had just begun to be plowed, so the air smelled of earth. The ground under their feet was damp due to the runoff from the melting mountain snow.

Amelia followed after Reese while making sure not to get her feet stuck in the mud. It had been a while since Reese had last visited the Lenia family's domain. Perhaps he wanted to reach their destination quickly, for he did not look back at her once.

"Reese..."

Amelia was about to ask him to slow down, but then she changed her mind. She decided it would be better to try to catch up with him, so she quickened her pace a bit.

Amelia's black hair fluttered as a slightly strong wind blew.

Spring was late in coming to the Lenia domain, which was situated in the northern part of the Kingdom of Bedeiht. The towns had even seen some snow that year, which was a rare occurrence. It never accumulated very much, and it usually melted the day after it fell, but compared to previous years, the winter had been harsh and cold.

For that reason, the warmth of the wind brought with it an even stronger feeling of spring than usual.

Next year, Reese will be going to the royal capital.

The two of them had still been children when their families arranged for them to be married, so she thought of Reese more as a brother who was one year older than her than as her future husband.

Whenever he visited the Lenia domain, he would usually take Amelia to walk around the farmland, as they were doing now. Reese would one day inherit this land as Amelia's husband, so the fact that it held such interest for him was a good thing for both the domain and Amelia herself. Although she was concerned about the data that she still hadn't analyzed and the magic class she was meant to take later that day, even her parents had told her she should prioritize spending time with Reese while he was here. Besides, Amelia was also quite happy that Reese was concerned about the Lenia domain.

Even the subjects of the land would stop their work to bow their

heads when they saw Reese.

“Ah, young master. It’s been a while.”

In response to their familiar address, Reese would smile and nod, then respond in turn.

“Well, spring has finally come. I’ll be visiting quite frequently now to make my rounds.”

Amelia’s father would have told the people that even if they saw him, a greeting was unnecessary, so that they would not stop their work. However, it seemed that Reese considered this to be an important part of interacting with the populace.

Amelia kept quiet behind him, not wanting to interrupt. In the beginning she had tried to join in the conversations, but Reese had gradually begun keeping her at a distance.

“You can speak with them any time you want, but I’m only able to do so occasionally. I want to be able to make the most of my time with them.”

Having been told that, she definitely couldn’t interrupt. It became a matter of course for her to hang back and wait quietly. Even the subjects who were concerned about her at first eventually began to speak only with Reese. Since he would soon become their lord, it seemed the right thing to do.

So thought Amelia as she gazed at the freshly tilled field.

I should focus on working hard at the things I can do.

Although her father wasn’t interested in it, Amelia would gather data about the farmland every year and compile it into documents. According to her data, they were seeing a decline in each year’s harvest. This was probably due to the fact that for the past few years, the summers hadn’t reached very high temperatures. Autumns were starting earlier, and winters were getting colder.

For the Lenia family, whose domain was mainly farmland, poor crop yields were a terrifying prospect.

I heard a new variety of grain has been developed. One that is resistant to cold-weather damage. I should ask Father for more details...

If that new variety grew as it was designed to, then surely their harvest would return to normal.

As Amelia was giving the matter careful thought, Reese, standing in front of her, smiled and nodded at the farmers who were speaking to him while he cast magic on the farmland.

It was earth magic, which Amelia could not use, and was greatly appreciated and highly valued by the villeins who tilled the earth. After waving a hand in response to the peasants, those who were nearly falling over themselves to give him thanks, Reese finally returned to Amelia’s side.

“You used earth magic, didn’t you, Reese? Thank you for that,”

said Amelia.

“Yeah. That plot should yield a greater harvest than any other. I want you to gather detailed data on it.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll make sure to examine and record it carefully.”

When Amelia said that, Reese nodded in satisfaction and resumed walking. Amelia gazed after his retreating figure, then looked up at the sky.

It’s gotten cloudy. Looks like it’s going to rain again...

Overcome with a strange sense of unease, Amelia hugged her shoulders.

Chapter 1: Fiancé's Betrayal

Winter had ended.

The almond trees were in blossom beside a simple dirt path packed hard by many footsteps. Amelia, the only daughter of the Lenia family, gazed at the fluttering, falling pink petals as she walked around to examine the farmland. She had blue eyes and long, black hair that reached down her back. Her arms and legs were a bit tanned, and though she was small, she had a supple, healthy figure.

The Lenia domain, which was far from the royal capital, encompassed a great deal of farmland, which meant that spring was a busy time. It also meant that Amelia, who could use water magic, was busy helping out at the various farms. She helped not only with watering the crops but with planting seedlings and removing weeds. Although she was a count's daughter, his was a rural domain, far removed from the capital, so it wasn't unusual for her to help with the farm work in this way. At least, it had become a natural thing to do in the Lenia family household.

However, water magic was unfortunately not considered that useful. After all, anyone could do watering and the like by hand. What was really necessary was earth magic, which could enrich the land and bring abundant harvests. A plot filled with magic could produce crops with incredible speed, and their size and taste would also be first rate.

For generations, the head of the Lenia family had been an earth magic user. However, Amelia's great-grandfather had fallen in love with and married the daughter of a viscount, and she had borne him a child with a water attribute. Amelia's great-grandmother was an excellent water magic user. The two of them had many children, but all of them were water magic users. That had apparently caused the two to quarrel and eventually led to their divorce.

It was a terribly sad ending to their passionate affair. Furthermore, the family had come to blame her great-grandfather for the disappearance of earth magic from their bloodline, a fact that was still lamented to that day.

Nobility must put the interests of their domain above their own feelings.

The story of her great-grandfather was repeated as a lesson, and it was one that Amelia herself had been told over and over again. That

was a measure of how much people valued earth magic users.

As the Lenia family's only daughter, Amelia had been engaged to Reese when she was five years old. Reese, the second son of the marquis of the Thurma family, had golden hair and green eyes and had grown into a handsome young man. Naturally, since it was a political marriage, the decision had belonged entirely to their parents.

For the Lenia family, Reese was the earth magic user they had long been awaiting. Even though he was merely a second son, his magic meant that a hefty sum of money was involved in welcoming him as a future son-in-law. Their land was in a remote region, but it was expansive, so Count Lenia was quite wealthy. Amelia had heard that of all her relatives, her father was especially excited at the prospect of bringing earth magic back to their lands.

On the Thurma family's side, the previous patriarch had suffered some business failures, meaning the arrangement was in the interest of both families. The plan was for Reese to become the successor to the Lenia family title.

Ever since Amelia was a child, she had been told she would marry Reese, so she took it as a fact of life. Her relationship with Reese was not a bad one. Since it was to be a political marriage, they weren't in love, and the affection they felt for one another was familial rather than romantic. But even so, they were going to become family in the future, so they got along reasonably well.

Perhaps because he was aware of the fact that he would one day inherit their land, Reese often visited the Lenia domain.

Last year we visited the fields together.

Amelia remembered that time as she surveyed the wide expanse of land.

The reason Amelia frequently made her rounds in this way was that Reese had cautioned her against devoting herself entirely to collecting data and studying magic. After all, researching magic that could only be used for watering wouldn't be of much use to the lands.

He said it would be better to interact more with the subjects...

So instead, the two of them would visit the domain's orphanages as well as its farms. The people welcomed his visits, admiring the hardworking Reese as their young master.

The two of them would often discuss the future. Reese planned to make more effective use of earth magic to further develop the land.

At least, that was what he had vowed to do.

Their relationship changed when Reese, one year Amelia's senior, went to the royal capital to attend the Royal Academy of Magic.

Magic was a special ability that only the scions of noble families could use. In order to learn magic, which was their natural duty, they

had to attend the academy for three years starting from the age of sixteen. Being a year older than Amelia, Reese had entered the academy before her.

"I'll come back during the summer. I want to see how the crops are growing," he had told her.

The Lenia domain mainly grew the grain known as gree, a staple food across the continent, and likely produced the largest volume of any domain in the kingdom.

However, the crops were planted in spring and ripened in autumn. Due to the cool summers, the production yield had been decreasing. Reese was quite concerned about that.

"I can send you the details in a letter," she had told him.

"That'd be great. We'll see each other in the summer."

That's what Reese had said when he'd stopped by the Lenia domain before starting school.

She'd figured he would return to his own home in the summer, so hearing him say without any hesitation that he would return to the Lenia domain had brought a smile to her face.

"I'll be waiting. The academy classes might be tough, but do your best!"

It was last spring when she'd said that and seen him off to the royal capital. However, even when summer arrived, Reese had not come to visit her family's domain.

He'd only sent a letter that said, *I'm busy with my studies, so I don't think I can come.*

Unconcerned, Amelia had merely thought, *The academy's coursework must really be taxing, huh?*

Naturally, she'd sent a response right away. *Don't worry about it. Good luck with your studies!* She thought she'd written something to that effect.

Reese had not responded to that letter, and Amelia had assumed that he was still busy with his studies.

But then autumn came, and Reese still hadn't written. Even when she sent him the details of the crop yields he'd been concerned about, there was no response.

Only when the season turned to winter did he finally send a brief letter stating: *Sorry for not writing. I've been busy.*

It went without saying that he did not return to visit.

By now, Amelia no longer expected Reese to contact her. She would also be going to the royal capital in the spring to attend the academy, so she could meet him there. Then she could show him the data she had collected.

The sons and daughters of the great noble houses that had residences within the royal capital would be able to commute to

school from their own homes, but students like Amelia, who had to leave their home regions, lived in dormitories on the school grounds.

She would have to attend the academy for three years.

She intended to return home during the longer breaks, but judging from how things were going for Reese, school life seemed as though it must be incredibly busy. Since she had several things to prepare in advance, she intended to move to the royal capital one month before the entrance ceremony. In the meantime, although her father was too busy to talk to her, she often talked to her mother.

“Children of noble families from all over the kingdom will be attending the academy. You might run into some trouble. If there’s ever anything that’s too difficult for you to resolve on your own, contact me immediately.”

Amelia responded to her worried mother with a smile. “Yes, mother.”

It would certainly be hard interacting with high-ranking nobility, but Amelia would be content if she got along with others of the same social standing as her own. That was her carefree notion at the time; she didn’t give her mother’s words too much thought.

In the spring, Amelia traveled to the royal capital where Reese was and moved into the academy dorms. She’d told him what day she would be arriving, so she’d thought her fiancé would come to meet her. However, he never responded to the letter she sent, and neither did he come to see her.

I can't believe it... Not only did he ignore my letter, he didn't even come to greet me.

Naturally, she thought that was strange, but as they were going to be attending the same school, she figured they would meet each other soon regardless. With that thought in mind, she settled into her dorm room and focused on preparing for the start of the semester.

The dorms were separated between male and female students, and students were strictly forbidden to visit the dorms for the opposite sex.

Not even engaged couples were exempt from that rule.

I'll be able to see him at school, but it's not as though I came to the royal capital to meet him, anyway.

She’d come here to make a proper study of magic, so that after she graduated she would be able to devote herself to the development of her family’s land. Besides, now that she had arrived at the royal capital, she was so busy with her own concerns that she wasn’t thinking about Reese much at all.

She’d thought that, since it was an academy, she would only need to study, but this was an academy exclusive to the nobility. It seemed tea parties as well as dance parties would be held frequently.

Moreover, there was apparently going to be a welcoming party for new students at the start of the semester.

That wasn't written on the academy schedule they gave me before enrollment, though...

In a panic, Amelia wrote a harried letter to her mother asking her to send a dress.

Amelia did not often go out into high society, so all she owned were simple dresses. The one her mother sent her in a hurry was the one she'd worn several years ago when she was invited to a tea party at a neighboring domain.

"Your fiancé didn't give you a dress?"

The one asking her was Countess Erica Coate, who lived in the room next to Amelia's. Just like Amelia, Erica came from a thriving agricultural domain. They'd instantly hit it off.

"Was he supposed to?"

"Yes, your fiancé is supposed to send you a dress for the welcome party more than a month beforehand, as a gift to celebrate your entering the academy."

"Is that so...?"

Amelia told Erica about how busy Reese had been and that he'd probably just forgotten.

Erica, exasperated, told her, "Stupid. Academy life isn't that busy. Besides, the son of a marquis wouldn't forget something as routine as that."

In other words, Reese had abandoned his duty as her fiancé and hadn't even told her there was going to be a welcome party.

Why would Reese do something like that...?

Although she felt uneasy, there were still many things to do to prepare for the start of the semester. The dress her mother had sent her was now too short, so Amelia had to get to work to alter it quickly.

In the middle of that busy day, Amelia passed by several other female students as she was walking through the dorm.

"Is that Reese's...?"

Unexpectedly overhearing his name in the middle of the dorm made Amelia stop in her tracks.

Did I just hear her say...Reese?

As she looked back, she saw two girls who seemed like upperclassmen looking her way and whispering.

"I think so."

"She's a lot plainer than I expected."

As she strained to hear, she was baffled to realize that they were bad-mouthing her.

Amelia had grown up in her family's domain, and this was only

her second time coming to the royal capital. Despite that, these girls somehow seemed to know who she was.

What's the meaning of this...?

Thinking it strange, Amelia stared at the girls. They seemed to sense her gaze, as their expressions turned a bit awkward and they hastily scurried away.

How do they know who I am?

Since they'd said Reese's name, it was possible they were acquaintances of his. She felt like they hadn't been looking at her with very nice expressions. Reese was quite a handsome guy, so maybe they were interested in him.

Amelia thought of her fiancé, whose face she hadn't seen in over a year.

I still haven't met up with Reese, and yet the welcome ceremony for new students is coming up...

She needed to ask him to be her escort to the party, so Amelia decided to put in a request to the dorm supervisor to meet with Reese. It was a matter of course that her fiancé would be her escort. No matter how busy Reese was, she figured he wouldn't be able to refuse.

And yet, the day before the welcoming party, Reese's reply came: "Sorry, but I don't have time to meet with you." He didn't even mention anything about the party.

Okay...this is a bit odd.

Her fiancé was obstinately refusing to meet her, and upperclassmen were staring at her and whispering. There must have been some reason for it all.

Even if he was busy, he was still a student. He couldn't have been too busy to even see her. She suspected he was actually just refusing to see her. The reason he hadn't returned for the summer, and had stopped writing letters, wasn't that he was busy but that he no longer wanted to see Amelia.

The idea was certainly shocking, but it was all she could think of.

But why, all of a sudden...?

The last time they had met, Reese had been smiling as usual. He'd even told her he would return over the summer so they could go together to see how the crops were growing.

Amelia was completely befuddled as to the reason behind Reese's sudden change of heart.

It was going to be a political marriage, but even so, she'd thought they were making strides towards building a good relationship. Even after he had gone to the royal capital, Amelia had done as he wanted: rather than focusing only on producing data and studying magic, she had proactively inspected and helped out on the farmlands as well.

Plus, they had been engaged for so long, she had started to care

for him as a future member of her family. But now that he was openly avoiding her, she wasn't so sure she wanted to meet him either.

But Father really wants earth magic to return to the domain...

Her father's obsession was so great that he did not even respect his wife's or his only daughter's volition. Of course, His Majesty the King's policy of agricultural expansion, as well as his expectations for the Lenia family, who owned a large agricultural domain, must have played a part in that as well.

Compared to past years, the kingdom's crop yields had been decreasing due to the changing weather. For the past several years, summers had been cooler than normal. There was a fear that, with the harvests decreasing year after year, they would soon face a food crisis. For that reason, grains with a resistance to cold damage, like gree, were being selectively bred. Beginning last year, the Lenia domain had adopted that new grain.

However, there were still some problems with that new grain, so it had yet to permeate throughout the entire kingdom. That was why His Majesty was endorsing agricultural development and selective breeding of more grains that could be grown during the cool summers. In that kind of situation, those who could wield earth magic and promote crop growth were extremely valuable.

Perhaps Reese had received another marriage proposal, one that was such a good match that it would even be worth returning the money Amelia's father had paid the Thurma family.

But I didn't hear about anything like that...

She thought it would be rude of the Thurma family to actively look for other marriage proposals while outwardly keeping the promise they'd made to her family, but they were a higher-ranking marquis family, after all.

Although, even if the Thurma family had accepted another marriage proposal and asked to dissolve their engagement, Amelia knew her father wouldn't have given up so easily. Perhaps he was negotiating handing over an even greater sum of money.

Of course, all without even considering Amelia's wishes.

But this was all conjecture. She reminded herself that she wouldn't know anything for certain until she met with Reese. Since enrolled students would also be participating in the welcoming party, she felt certain she would be able to meet him there. She believed he would come to meet her then, as it was the custom for fiancés to escort their betrothed.

The party arrived, but still there was no word from Reese.

Amelia donned the dress she had altered herself, looked in the mirror, and let out a deep breath. Her dress was green, while her

accessories were golden, chosen to match her fiancé Reese's own eye and hair color.

The style was a bit old-fashioned, but it must have been the nicest one she owned.

I'll have to wear it this time.

The Lenia family wasn't so poor that they couldn't afford a dress. It was just that the prices in the royal capital were much higher than in their own remote domain. A dress by a popular designer in the capital could cost around the same amount as a year's worth of food in their outlying domain.

Nevertheless, fashion changed rapidly, so the plan was for Amelia to get a little more accustomed to life in the royal capital and then have a few high-quality dresses tailored for her without regard for the current trends.

Amelia arrived alone at the entrance of the party venue, a great hall between the academy and the dorms. In front of the hall stretched a spacious courtyard, where all the students had gathered, dressed in elegant attire.

There were those meeting up with fiancés and others who had met up with friends and were chatting cheerfully. But it was the sight of all the beautifully dressed and eligible young ladies that was truly stunning.

Everyone's wearing such lovely dresses...

As she looked at them, she felt a bit embarrassed to remember that her own dress was several years out of style.

She thought that if Reese had told her about the party, she could have had enough time to buy a new dress. But then she reflected that it was her own fault that she still didn't have many friends or a good understanding of the academy's affairs.

It was about time for the party to begin.

But Reese hadn't arrived.

He hadn't even promised to meet her.

Resolved to enter alone, Amelia headed towards the great hall. Standing next to the academy, the hall was so large that even with the entire student body inside, there was still a lot of space.

I wouldn't have expected any less of the Royal Academy of Magic, she thought as she looked up at the building.

Numerous boys and girls had paired up and were headed into the building with their hands joined together. Those entering before Amelia were met with applause. The dance party was an opportunity for students to engage in social exchange, after all. However, precisely because of that, Amelia felt it would be even more difficult for her to enter.

Am I really going to have to go in alone?

It seemed it was the custom for everyone to enter with a partner, as there was not a single student entering unaccompanied. It was likely that those who did not have fiancés had asked someone else to escort them for that day.

It really didn't seem like the kind of party one could enter alone. However, the longer she waited to go in, the more attention she would attract when she did enter. That being the case, it would be better if she stopped expecting Reese to come and entered as quickly as she could.

With that thought in mind, she was waiting for the right moment to enter the venue when she suddenly heard a voice from behind her.

"The party is starting soon. Aren't you going in?"

"Ah!"

Startled, Amelia turned to see a lone male student looking at her.

This was Amelia's second time in the royal capital, and since she hadn't had many interactions with other nobles, she had no idea who the boy was. But still, she bowed her head, flustered. She could tell at a glance that he was from a high-ranking noble family.

He had beautiful golden hair and green eyes that were as clear as emeralds.

He was enchantingly handsome.

Although he was slim and not very tall, he gave off an air of dignity just by standing quietly. But he had a gentle demeanor, and he was looking at Amelia kindly.

She gave a frantic reply so as not to be rude. "Um, no. I haven't been able to get in touch with my fiancé, so I decided to wait for him, in case I could meet him here..."

The boy nodded. "I see. But the party has already started, so it might be better for you to search for your fiancé inside," he said, extending a hand to her. "Allow me to escort you inside."

"Huh? But..."

"I cannot bear to see a lady enter alone. I don't have a fiancée myself, and I don't think your fiancé would have any strange misunderstandings if I were the one to escort you."

Amelia glanced back and forth, flustered by the sudden proposal.

"...Okay. I greatly appreciate it."

Amelia agreed partly because she was worried about entering the venue but partly because she felt she couldn't refuse the invitation of someone who was clearly of higher status than her.

Nervously, Amelia took his hand.

His hand was smooth and soft, completely unlike her own, which had become rough from helping out with the farmwork. Just who was this person who projected such sophisticated beauty even just walking?

What should I do? I can't just ask him his name...

As she glanced around her, she saw that everyone was looking at the boy with shocked expressions. He must have been well known among the student body. Before she enrolled, her mother had told her about the high-ranking nobility as well as members of the royal family who would be attending the school, so that Amelia would be prepared to mind her manners around them. She now desperately tried to recall that information.

Among the third-years were the third prince and the son of a duke.

The fourth prince and the daughter of a duke were second-years, like Reese.

And apparently there was a daughter of a marquis who was a new student like Amelia.

Amelia tried hard to figure out the identity of this boy who was holding her hand and escorting her inside.

Although they were attending the same school, Amelia didn't believe she—who, although the daughter of a count, came from a remote region—would ever come into contact with those types of high-ranking nobles. Thinking that, she greatly regretted that she had not properly studied their names and characteristics.

I never imagined something like this would happen...

Unaware of Amelia's thoughts, the boy held her hand as he stepped into the great hall.

Reese had escorted Amelia on a few different occasions, but the way this boy matched her pace and made it easy for her to follow his lead was so incredibly elegant that she felt a bit moved.

At the sight of the two of them, the crowd that was to greet them with applause instead greeted them with a commotion.

Why are they paying so much attention to us?

Puzzled by their response, she entered the hall.

However, unlike the other students, the boy did not stop to bow at the entrance. Amelia, who had awkwardly curtsied, looked up at him, and he gave her a graceful smile before walking forward with his hand still in hers. Amelia was barely able to keep her composure and had no idea what all of this could mean. But as the two of them walked, the students in the hall bowed their heads one after another.

Just as she had guessed, he must have been quite a high-ranking noble.

Members of the royal family also attended this school. If he wasn't bowing his head to the monarchy, did that mean he himself was royalty? If she remembered correctly, the third prince, Julius, was a third-year. And she was fairly sure the fourth prince, Sarge, was a second-year. Perhaps this boy was one of those two.

As she frantically considered the various possibilities, he must have noticed her bewilderment, and he gave his name.

“Oh, I haven’t told you my name yet, have I? I’m Sarge.”

He said it so casually, and Amelia’s hand began to shake.

No way—he’s really Prince Sarge? What should I do...?

Amelia couldn’t believe the person holding her hand was a member of the royal family, and she repeatedly came close to stopping in her tracks. However, taking into account his dignified appearance and soft, graceful demeanor, it was obvious that he was royalty.

The magic power of the kingdom’s royal family was on another level, and they could even use light magic.

Everyone was born with a particular magical affinity. Amelia’s affinity was for water magic, while Reese had an affinity for earth magic. One’s affinity at birth was permanent and unchangeable.

However, light magic users could also control another magical affinity of their choice.

Everyone was watching as Amelia was escorted by a member of that very royalty.

That was only natural. The fourth prince did not have a fiancée, and now he was entering the great hall holding the hand of an unknown girl.

“Do you see your fiancé?” he asked in a completely calm voice, clearly used to this amount of attention.

In response, Amelia frantically looked around her, but she saw no trace of Reese.

“No... Unfortunately not.”

It seemed like people were staring at her even more than they would have if she had entered alone. But now that she had successfully made it inside, she could become a wallflower. If she could leave the prince’s side, she would be released from all these painful stares.

However, despite her thinking that, Sarge would not let go of Amelia’s hand.

“I see. In that case, since we have the opportunity, why don’t we dance?”

“Huh?” At those unexpected words, Amelia looked up at Sarge in shock. “Um, Prince Sarge, why would you want to dance with me...?”

“I escorted you in, so I don’t intend on just abandoning you without a dance,” he said, taking her hand and leading her along.

Sarge wasn’t forcefully pulling her with him. And yet, guided by his gentle, kind smile, Amelia felt that she couldn’t escape him. Before she knew it, they were in the middle of the hall, facing each other with their hands joined together.

Umm, how did this happen?

As music played, the students surrounding them began to dance.

Although this was a welcoming party for the academy, it was still a first dance, so everyone was probably paired up and dancing with their betrothed or prospective betrothed.

Amelia's fiancé was Reese.

But since she couldn't meet up with Reese, she had somehow ended up dancing with the fourth prince, Sarge. Although she was confused, she couldn't run away now.

Sarge took the lead skillfully; it was the first time she had been able to dance in such a light manner.

Amelia liked dancing, but since Reese didn't care for it much, they almost never danced together at the parties they attended, instead electing only to watch.

And yet now, she was able to dance to her heart's content in the middle of the dance floor. She was so immersed in the joy of dancing she forgot that her partner was His Highness the Prince—and the fact that Reese was also somewhere on the floor.

The music stopped.

As Amelia came to her senses, Sarge, still gripping her hand, asked her, "May I have your name?"

"M-My apologies. My name is Amelia, daughter of Count Grond Lenia."

"Ah, the domain that produces the most grain in the kingdom—that Lenia domain?"

Sarge's expression suddenly turned bright, causing the people around them to start murmuring. Although they couldn't have heard what the two were conversing about, they must have seen the cheerful smile that had just appeared on Sarge's face.

"If you don't mind, I'd love for you to tell me about the affairs of your domain."

"...Of course. If you so wish me to."

Why would the fourth prince be so interested in that remote region? She thought it was strange. But then again, the king was trying to promote the development of more farmland, so perhaps, as a member of the royal family, the prince also had some involvement in that policy.

"I wish to speak to you further, but I have some business I must attend to at the castle. I apologize, but I'll take my leave here."

He apologized, as well, for not seeing her back to her dorm as her escort, but Amelia shook her head frantically.

"No, it's no trouble at all. Thank you for accompanying me this far. I had a lot of fun dancing."

She felt like that was probably not a proper reply for a young lady, but she wanted him to know how much fun she'd had, and after

she said so, Sarge smiled gently and kissed the back of her hand.

“Miss Amelia, please enjoy your evening. We’ll meet again at the academy,” he said, then dashed off.

Amelia couldn’t believe she had just danced with him, and she looked after his dwindling figure until she could no longer see him.

When the next song started to play, she came to her senses.

No matter how hard it was to refuse a prince’s invitation, Amelia still had a fiancé. She began to feel a little guilty about Reese.

She was quickly moving towards the wall, being careful not to get in the way of the dancing students, when someone rushed over to her.

“Amelia, what was that about?”

“...Oh, Erica.”

Amelia took a deep breath to calm herself down and then told Erica all the details about how the prince had come to be her escort. “I was waiting to see if my fiancé would show up. But I didn’t want to enter by myself. As I was hesitating at the entrance, he called out to me.”

“...I see.” After hearing her out, Erica seemed to finally accept the situation and nodded. “It seems like it was completely by chance, but you’re in trouble now. Why was Prince Sarge, who barely interacts with the other students, dancing so happily with you?”

“Oh, um...”

Had he seemed like he was enjoying himself? Amelia had been so focused on the excitement of dancing that she hadn’t even been aware of him.

“That reminds me, he said he wanted to hear more about my family’s domain.”

“Well, of course. Prince Sarge specializes in earth magic, after all.”

“Huh?” Amelia raised her head, astounded that she hadn’t known that either.

She did know that members of the royal family could choose a magical affinity in addition to light magic, but she didn’t know what magical affinities each had chosen.

“His Highness the Prince specializes in offensive fire magic. The second prince, Prince Est, specializes in supportive wind magic. The third prince, Prince Julius, specializes in healing water magic. And finally, Prince Sarge is an earth magic specialist.”

“Is that so...?”

The very earth magic that Amelia so yearned for.

The fact that Sarge was an earth magic specialist, and held an interest in her family’s domain, was an incredible honor, and a hard-earned one at that. However, since Amelia had had no clue about all that, she’d ended up reacting to him with confusion.

“There are many things I should know better, aren’t there?”

“Yes, I’d say so.”

As Erica went back to dancing with her fiancé, Amelia earnestly reflected. Because of that, she didn’t notice the hostile stares that surrounded her.

She passed the time as a wallflower, and when the party began to break up, she left on her own. She hadn’t been able to catch sight of Reese that entire time. Since he hadn’t even contacted her, it was likely he had not attended the party.

With the end of the welcoming party and the completion of the examination that determined how the classes should be divided up, tomorrow would at last mark the beginning of school life.

Amelia received a large pile of textbooks, but the content was much the same as what she’d learned from her home tutor. She was sure that must have been the same for her classmates.

This academy, which only the nobility attended, placed great importance not only on the study of magic but on making personal connections. So it seemed impossible that Reese was too busy to return to her domain, as he had said.

Now that I think about it, his excuse doesn’t make much sense.

Amelia let out a sigh, frustrated with her own foolishness in believing him for so long.

Perhaps Reese no longer wanted to see Amelia for some reason.

The royal capital was certainly lively and flourishing, and the ladies who attended the academy were refined and beautiful. Living in the midst of all that, Reese must have gotten tired of the Lenia family’s rural domain and a fiancée as plain as Amelia.

But if that was the case, I wish he would have just told me...

Reese had often visited the Lenia domain, and they had frequently discussed the future together.

As they had made their rounds of the farmlands, they had even laid out concrete plans for the future: Reese would use earth magic to enrich the lands, and Amelia would mingle with the subjects and manage the data on the harvests. She’d thought they had built a good relationship as an engaged couple.

Despite all that, he had failed to convey any important information in those letters, and she now wondered whether they had actually been meant to deceive her. As she thought about that, she began to feel an emptiness.

However, the extent of Reese’s dishonesty did not end there.

Classes were divided up based on the results of the examination the students took after enrolling in school.

Because Amelia wanted to help out on her family’s farmland, she

had proactively studied magic for quite some time, so she managed to get placed in the high-achieving A class. And perhaps due to luck, she even received the highest grades of anyone.

Unfortunately, her friend Erica was placed in the B class.

Furthermore, most of the students in the A class were high-ranking nobles who lived in the royal capital, so Amelia, being the only one from the countryside, really stood out.

No matter how much this place served as a microcosm of noble society, it was still officially a school. As long as she put an honest effort into her studies, she would make it out all right, no matter how much she stood out.

That was what she thought, but for several days after the start of the semester, Amelia came to realize she didn't just stand out.

There was the matter of missing out on important information. For example, people weren't telling her about things like changes to classes or the due dates for homework.

And even if she did have to talk to someone, no one would respond to her.

One of the high-ranking noble girls who had become the center of class was the daughter of a marquis and had beautiful red hair.

Amelia had become the object of her hostility, and it seemed like all their other classmates were going along with her.

Why is she being so antagonistic towards me...?

Was it because Amelia's family was rural nobility? Or did the girl maybe have a problem with Amelia herself? With the reason left unexplained, Amelia's feelings of alienation grew stronger by the day.

As if that weren't enough, when she tried to call out to Erica, whom she saw in the hallway, Erica's face changed color at the sight of her, and she ran away as if she was fleeing from Amelia.

What...?

Having her friend run away from her, and being inexplicably isolated, caused tears to well up in Amelia's eyes involuntarily. She desperately fought them back as she ran out of the school building.

She knew it was disgraceful behavior for a young noblewoman, but she definitely didn't want to cry in front of a large crowd of people who would watch and laugh at her.

However, as she lost control of her tears, she carelessly failed to check her surroundings. She rounded the corner of the building and ran with full force into the person standing on the other side.

Amelia and the person she ran into both let out exclamations of surprise, and then he seemed to try to catch her.

However, Amelia was running at full force, with the centrifugal force she'd gained rounding the corner being included in that. Not being able to withstand the powerful impact, both Amelia and the

person she ran into tumbled to the ground.

“Ah...”

A piercing pain shot through her ankle. But rather than her own pain, she was focused on apologizing to the person she had tumbled into. She raised her head and began to utter her apology.

“Ah, I’m so—”

Before she could finish, however, a strong force pulled her arms behind her back and pinned her down.

“...Ow.”

Amelia was being held down on the ground from behind by the big, strong arm of a male student.

“Roy, let her go.”

Amelia heard a familiar voice, and the force that was restraining her relaxed. When Amelia raised her head, she saw the boy she’d run into taking the hand of another male student at his side and standing up.

“Sorry about that. I meant to stop you, but I made us both fall instead. Are you hurt?”

“...Prince Sarge!”

She had run into someone with great force and knocked him down. When Amelia realized the person was none other than the kingdom’s fourth prince, she forgot all about the pain in her ankle and quickly kneeled before him right there.

“I-I’m terribly sorry!”

Since she had run into a member of the royal family and made him fall over, it was only natural that his bodyguard had restrained her.

“Ah, it’s you. It seems we’re fated to keep meeting.”

Despite all that, Sarge looked completely unaffected. In fact, based on what he’d said, it seemed he was happy now that he realized who she was. He reached his hand out to Amelia, who was still planted on the ground, but suddenly, he made a face.

“...Ugh.”

He was holding his right wrist, so he’d probably hurt it when they’d fallen over.

Amelia went pale. If she had hurt a member of the royal family due to her own carelessness, she would surely receive punishment on the grounds of *lèse-majesté*.

The male student next to him, who seemed to be his aide, frantically grabbed his hand.

“Your Highness, are you terribly hurt?”

“No, I must have just twisted it a bit. It’s nothing serious. More importantly...”

Sarge shifted his gaze towards Amelia, who was sitting on the

ground, her face white.

“Please help her up.”

The boy who had restrained Amelia, and whom Sarge had called Roy, exchanged a wordless look with the other boy at Sarge’s side.

Neither seemed to want to offer her his hand.

The tears she had forgotten about threatened to overflow once more.

Ever since she’d come to the royal capital, it seemed these kinds of things kept happening.

She couldn’t think of anything she had done wrong, but she had no one to call a friend. So why did everyone hate her? She thought maybe she was at fault, but since she didn’t know the reason, there was nothing she could do.

Not wanting to continue looking so disgraceful, she decided to get up on her own.

“...Ah!”

However, the ankle she had twisted hurt quite a bit, and, unable to stand on it, she almost fell over again.

“Watch out!”

It was Sarge who held her up.

He’d done it on the spur of the moment, so he must have unconsciously put a burden on his injured right hand, as he was now stifling a cry of pain.

“Prince Sarge, I’m sorry!”

Flustered, she tried to move away from him, but he placed his arm around her back.

“It’s better if you don’t move. You twisted your ankle, didn’t you? I’ll bring you to the infirmary.”

Holding his breath, he picked her up. Although Amelia was small, she must still have been placing too great a burden on the injured hand he was holding her with.

“Your Highness, there’s no need. Your hand is injured...”

She tried to stop him, but Sarge was already making his way back to the academy building with her in his arms.

“Prince Sarge, allow me,” said his guard, rushing over, but Sarge didn’t acknowledge him.

“I think she’ll feel uneasy being carried by someone she can’t trust. Roy, Paul, both of you can head back for today.”

He sounded upset at them for not having immediately offered their hands to Amelia before. Until now, she had been inexplicably disliked and avoided; that had been her entire experience of school. Sarge becoming angry on her behalf nearly brought her to tears again.

“But...”

His bodyguard was unsure what to do, since he could not just let a

member of the royal family move about on his own. And since Sarge wouldn't let go of Amelia, the bodyguard couldn't even help in that regard.

Sarge paid no mind to the two young men who followed behind him, dismayed, as he made his way towards the infirmary.

"Sarge, what's wrong?"

Someone suddenly called out to him from behind, finally forcing him to stop.

"Ah, brother. Great timing."

From Sarge's response, Amelia realized the one who had called out to them was Third Prince Julius, and she hurriedly bowed her head.

Julius was accompanied by a guard and seemed to be on his way back to the royal castle.

Under normal circumstances, she would have had to give a proper greeting, but as she was being carried by Sarge, bowing her head was the most she could do.

"I want you to use your healing magic on her. I ran into her and injured her."

She hurried to deny his words. "Prince Sarge? I'm the one who ran into you..."

She was the one who had run out without looking where she was going, then bumped into and injured him. Plus, she couldn't possibly accept being treated with healing magic for such a small injury.

"I'm fine. It's not a serious injury."

She'd heard that the third prince Julius was a water magic specialist. Water magic could be used as treatment for things like wounds and poisons. There probably wasn't anyone else who used it to water farmlands like Amelia did.

Julius had short, black hair and green eyes. He was a tall, stately, handsome young man. While Crown Prince Alexis and Sarge's mother was the queen consort, Second Prince Est and Third Prince Julius's mother was the king's concubine, so Sarge and Julius didn't look much alike. However, it was well known that the four brothers all got along well.

"Still, I'm sorry my brother did that to you. We'll bring you to the infirmary right away. Right, you two can leave. Sarge will come with me."

At Julius's words, the two flustered bodyguards following behind Sarge bowed their heads and left.

In the end, the two princes and Julius's bodyguard brought Amelia to the infirmary. It went without saying that they drew the attention of everyone around them. She wished she could go back to her dorm, but since she couldn't bring herself to say so, she just kept

her head down.

There was no one in the infirmary. However, Julius went ahead and unlocked the room and ushered the two of them in as if it were his own room. The moment Sarge gingerly placed Amelia on a bed, Julius began casting a healing spell.

“There, you should be good now. Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“Thank you very much. I’m fine, but, um, Prince Sarge is also hurt, so if you could please...”

When she asked him to heal Sarge as well, Julius gave him a stern look.

“Where?”

Sarge refused to respond, so Julius shifted his gaze to Amelia.

“U-Um, his right wrist, I think,” answered Amelia.

Julius touched Sarge’s right hand. She was relieved to finally see healing magic be used on him.

“Thanks. This guy always tries to stay quiet and hide stuff, so if I hadn’t known about it, his injury probably would have gotten worse.”

“Not at all. Rather, thank you for casting healing magic on such a trivial injury as my own,” Amelia said, bowing her head low.

Julius smiled and told her not to worry about it. He seemed like a very friendly person.

“By the way, you’re the girl Sarge escorted at the new student welcoming party, aren’t you? Could it be that Sarge has finally decided on a fiancée?”

Amelia hurriedly shook her head as if to say that was preposterous.

Sarge was also quick to explain the situation. “Lady Amelia has a fiancé. She wasn’t able to meet up with him at that moment and seemed troubled, so I asked her to let me escort her.”

“Really? That’s a shame. You danced with him, so I thought you might not have a fiancé. It’s probably fine, since you were dancing with Sarge, but I’m sorry if your fiancé got the wrong impression.”

“No, it was fine,” replied Amelia, even though she’d ended up not being able to meet with Reese.

Julius’s gaze turned to Amelia, and she remembered she hadn’t given her name yet. She curtsied and introduced herself.

“My apologies for not saying so sooner, but I am Amelia, the daughter of Grond, Count of Lenia.”

“I’m Julius. May I just call you Amelia?”

“Yes, of course.”

She felt relieved at his kind, friendly words, and Julius let out a sudden laugh.

“If you don’t like it, then you should ask for permission to call her that too.”

Of course, he wasn't speaking to Amelia. That meant he must be speaking to Sarge, but there was no way Sarge could have possibly wanted that. Julius must have just been teasing his younger brother. While it was heartwarming to see the playful teasing between two brothers, it was a little embarrassing; she wished they wouldn't make her the topic of their banter. As she thought that, she looked at Sarge, and he looked straight back at her.

Being stared at by those green eyes, which sparkled like jewels, made Amelia's heart pound.

"May I also call you Amelia?"

"Huh? Y-Yes. Of course."

She nodded reflexively, and a happy smile appeared on Sarge's face.

It was different from his usual smile, which was gentle and friendly. Instead, this one seemed filled with emotion. It was Amelia's second time seeing him smile like that.

"Very nice, Sarge," said Julius, the one who'd started all this, as he patted Sarge on the back. "You made your first friend. Treat her well."

Amelia was surprised by Julius's words, but she was even more shocked to see Sarge nod shyly.

"I-I couldn't possibly be worthy of being His Highness's friend..."

"Oh, no, Sarge is so focused on studying earth magic and botany that he barely interacts with his classmates, so I was getting a bit worried."

Amelia felt it difficult to refuse after Julius had said that; she looked up at Sarge.

"Um, Your Highness..."

"I want you to call me Sarge, Amelia."

"Y-Yes."

Having been told that by someone with a face so handsome it would captivate anyone, Amelia nodded without thinking.

"Of course, I'm your friend too, so call me Julius. Well then, it's about time for the end of classes, so I'll take you back to your dorm," said Julius, standing up. Sarge followed suit.

Still not having grasped the situation, Amelia hurriedly refused. "Oh, no, it's close by, so..."

In this country, royalty was absolute. Having two members of the royal family, who needed bodyguards within the academy, escort her back to her dorm would have been just too much.

"It's okay; we're returning to the royal castle anyway. Maybe it would be more like a friend to say 'let's go part of the way back together?'"

There was no way to decline now that Julius had gone so far as to

say that, and even Sarge was encouraging her. Fortunately, it was nearing the end of the day, so there were barely any students remaining at school. The two princes brought her to the entrance of her dorm before boarding a horse-drawn carriage prepared by Julius's guard. She watched the carriage disappear towards the royal castle, then entered the girls' dormitory.

When she returned to her room, she heard the door of the neighboring room slam shut with a bang. The unnaturally loud sound made Amelia remember that Erica, who occupied that room and who she'd thought was her friend, had turned her back on her and run away.

But that seemed like an insignificant event compared to what had transpired earlier: Amelia had run into and injured Sarge, and despite that, he'd carried her to the infirmary, where Julius had healed her. And what's more, the two princes had acknowledged her as their friend.

Even if Amelia did try talking to Erica again, she would probably run away like before. And maybe she wouldn't just run away but would even throw Amelia a disgusted look.

Amelia wished that instead of being hurt again, she had just been alone from the beginning. If Reese was so intent on not seeing Amelia, then he didn't have to. She didn't need to interact with her classmates. She would be fine just gathering the information she needed on her own and confirming it with a teacher.

"I'll be fine on my own for three years."

She thought she had said those words with firm resolve, but tears overflowed and fell down her cheeks.

Only just recently she had been looking forward to attending the academy; she had been relieved that she would finally be able to talk to Reese after having lost contact with him for so long.

She'd never thought things would end up like this.

But she just wasn't feeling the energy to find out why she was so hated, nor the determination to press Reese for answers. She would be content to spend the next three years focused on learning magic that would be useful for developing her family's domain.

As she thought that, Sarge came to her mind.

He had been her escort. And even though he had been injured, he had held her in his arms.

And he had even called Amelia, who was hated by everyone, a friend.

She knew enough to realize someone like herself from the rural nobility couldn't be allowed to act like a friend to Sarge, a member of the royal family. But still, having him call her his friend would surely serve to uplift her heart as she endured her three years of solitude.

Chapter 2: The One Who Became an Ally

Amelia moved through the day alone, ignoring the stares and whispers of the classmates who surrounded her.

She concentrated on class, and during breaks, she remained at her desk and spent her time studying.

But still, there were times when she was forced to move.

I guess I have to eat in the dining hall during lunch time, she thought.

Things were different here than in her family's domain. In years past, she would often have a picnic with the villeins after completing her rounds of the farmlands.

Of course, here, she understood that as a young noblewoman, it would be unbecoming of her to have lunch in the classroom or the courtyard.

As she faced the dining hall alone, three female students passing by looked at Amelia and giggled.

They were holding trays; even nobility had to carry their own meals in this academy. The girls were probably on their way to take their seats. Amelia heard them say things like "How sad, she's eating alone" and "Serves her right," but she chose to ignore them. Amelia no longer felt anything at being ridiculed by these girls she'd never seen before, and whom she couldn't even identify as upperclassmen or girls in her year.

"Oops, my hand slipped."

But perhaps her lack of reaction had set one of them off.

The young lady in front of her dropped her cup, filled with steaming hot tea, directly over Amelia.

Amelia gave a wordless exclamation of surprise.

Naturally startled, she reflexively shut her eyes and braced for the impact. But despite how long she waited, the hot tea never reached her. Instead, before she knew it, an arm was firmly protecting her.

"Amelia, are you okay?"

"Ah..."

He quickly moved the arm that had protected her, probably due to the fact they were in a public space, and also out of consideration for Amelia's fiancé.

But Amelia instantly clung to that protective arm.

"Sarge! Why did you do that...?"

The tea that had been meant to douse Amelia had spilled onto the arm he'd used to cover her. She'd heard that, unlike the regular school uniforms, the uniforms for members of the royal family were imbued with a protective magic that wouldn't allow even a knife to cut through them. So something like hot tea was trifling. The uniform likely hadn't even gotten wet. But still, the hot tea had splattered and had even made its way onto the back of Sarge's hand.

His fair skin had turned bright red. Seeing that, Amelia went completely white, feeling shaken.

"Oh no, what should we do? What should..."

Amelia could also use water magic, but only a select few were allowed to use magic on royalty.

"Let's go to Julius...!"

If they could get to him, he'd quickly be able to heal Sarge.

On the verge of tears, Amelia looked around them. Maybe someone had already called him, or maybe he had heard the commotion, but fortunately, Julius had already arrived with his guard.

"What is going on here?"

His friendly demeanor from yesterday was gone completely, replaced with a stern, questioning tone. Everyone besides Sarge bowed their heads to him.

Julius's expression grew even sterner when he noticed the broken cup, Amelia's tear-filled eyes, and Sarge's red hand.

As he used healing magic, Julius looked around, and seeing that Sarge was on his own, he sighed and said, "Maybe you should change your guard."

After checking to see that Sarge's hand had returned to normal, Amelia sank to the floor in relief.

"Well, then, I want to hear what exactly happened here. You three and Amelia—and you too, Sarge—come with me to the student council room," said Julius. The girl who had tried to spill tea on Amelia turned pale, as did her two friends.

"I-I was only..."

"We didn't do anything. It was all Mira."

"Wha— How could you?!"

Julius's guard stood in front of the quarreling girls, blocking any escape. Things were getting more serious than they had anticipated. As Amelia watched the three of them be taken away to the student council room, someone held a hand out in front of her.

"Can you stand, Amelia?"

Sarge was looking at Amelia with worry in his eyes.

"Y-Yes. Thank you very much."

She took his hand and hastily stood up, and they followed Julius and the others towards the student council room.

So this is the student council room..

She couldn't help looking around the room as they were guided through it. The academy's student council was composed solely of high-ranking nobles. This was likely the only time Amelia would be able to enter this room.

The student council room was actually divided into two rooms, one being a conference room and the other an office. Filing cabinets, meticulously organized by labels, lined the walls of the office. Amelia and the others were led through to the conference room, and each sat down in a chair.

Julius stood in the front of the room. Behind him was a large screen.

"All right, first, everyone tell me their names."

The three white-faced girls started and shuddered. At first, they were speechless, but then...

"P-Please forgive us. W-We didn't do..."

They looked up at Julius with frightened eyes, but he didn't drop his stern expression.

"If you don't answer, then you will be questioned at the castle. The truth of the matter is, you three have brought harm to Sarge. We can't just let you go without hearing what you have to say for yourselves."

In order to protect light magic, anyone who brought harm to the royalty who wielded it would be severely punished—except in cases like Amelia's, where it was proven to be unintentional. However, if one were to remain silent, like the girls were doing right now, one really could be taken away to the royal castle.

As if they understood that, the girls spoke their names in quivering voices. Apparently, they were in the year above Amelia.

"I didn't mean to bring harm to Prince Sarge. Really. It's just...my hand slipped, and I spilled my tea. And that girl happened to be there."

The only ones who knew she had meant to drop the hot tea were Amelia and the three other girls. Of course, they probably hadn't anticipated that Sarge would arrive to protect Amelia. It was undeniably true that they hadn't meant to harm him. For that reason, Amelia decided to let their comment about not spilling the tea on purpose slide. Although the girl had nearly scorched her with hot tea, Amelia didn't want them to be punished on false charges. They were complete strangers to her, after all.

"Is that so?"

Julius nodded silently, then shifted his gaze to his younger brother and asked, "And why were you there?"

Amelia had also found that strange.

In order to avoid possibly being poisoned, the members of the royal family did not eat in the dining hall with the other students. They had their own room for that. The place was so well guarded that not even fiancées of the royal family were granted access.

So there had to have been some reason that he'd been in the dining hall.

Light magic was incredibly valuable; it had already been lost in other countries, but in the Kingdom of Bedeiht, there were now four princes who could use it.

The story that had been passed down was that, several hundred years ago, the Kingdom of Bedeiht had welcomed a saint as their queen, and thus the royal family had received the blessing of the goddess of light. That blessing could be inherited only through the direct royal line, with the majority of the cases being children of the heir apparent.

However, in the past, there had been rare cases in which even members of the royal family outside of the monarch's children were born with a light magic affinity. Several decades ago, clinging to that faint possibility, someone had kidnapped the princess of Bedeiht. The scene of that tragedy had been this very academy. That was the reason royalty were always heavily protected and always had a guard in tow. And that was the reason anyone would have wondered why Sarge, despite all that, had visited the dining hall on his own and had been there to shield Amelia from the tea.

When his older brother asked him why, Sarge gave his reason.

"I was looking for Amelia because I wanted to ask her about something. I saw her at the entrance of the dining hall and made my way over to her. It was then that the incident occurred."

And he had quickly put his hand out in order to protect Amelia.

"What was your guard doing?"

Sarge shook his head as if to say he didn't know. Julius's own guard, who was standing watch by the door, made a face as if he felt sympathy for Sarge's guard.

Sarge must have had a habit of walking around on his own like that.

"Um, you wanted to ask me something...?" said Amelia without thinking.

"I wanted to ask about the new cold weather-resistant grains that were approved for cultivation the year before last. I was curious whether the Lenia domain has been using them."

"The new variety of grain?"

Amelia nodded.

The new cold weather-resistant grains had come into general circulation the year before last. She'd heard they had been

considerably improved and now grew easily, but they were still susceptible to harmful insects, so they hadn't actually spread very far. However, with the proper measures, their weakness against insects could be mitigated.

Since the Lenia domain was prioritizing grains that had a resistance to cold weather, they had mostly switched over to the new grains starting this year.

"We planted some last year to test them out. The harvest increased, so this year we're mostly planting the new variety."

"Really?" Sarge's face lit up, and he stood and gripped Amelia's hand enthusiastically. "Please, tell me more. If possible, everything about last year's harvest, and the insect damage. And..."

"...Sarge. I understand your curiosity as someone researching botany, but we have more pressing matters at hand," said Julius. He sighed.

At those words, Sarge returned to his senses and sat back down.

Amelia had heard Sarge was an earth magic specialist, but was he also involved in the selective breeding of grains? He must have really been working hard on improving the kingdom's food situation.

"Now then, we've strayed off course, but I will now confirm each of your testimonies using reenactment magic," said Julius. He urged everyone to look at the screen behind him.

Amelia had never heard of such magic. An image suddenly appeared on the screen, and she and the other three girls regarded it with wonder. It was a projection situated inside the dining hall and facing the entrance.

"Ah..."

Seeing her own figure at the entrance, Amelia unconsciously raised her voice.

Apparently this was Julius's magic. She had never heard of magic that could reproduce the past, so it must have been a type of light magic that only royalty could use.

There was Amelia, glancing around the packed dining hall with a blank expression until she finally decided to join the end of the line. And there were the three girls holding trays, inching towards her with derisive smiles on their faces.

"How sad—she's eating alone."

"She's getting in the way of true love. It serves her right."

"Did you hear about the party? I'd love to know what trick she used to pull that off."

The words she hadn't been able to hear before were now clear as a bell.

The bit about the party must have been in reference to Sarge acting as her escort, but there were also a few things she had no idea

about.

Did they say “true love”...?

She tilted her head, at a loss for what they could have meant by that.

The girls were saying nasty things about Amelia in low voices. And then the screen clearly showed the girl in the middle purposefully spill her tea.

“Oops, my hand slipped.”

Confronted with their own words, all three girls turned pale, and Julius and Sarge’s faces grew stern.

Sarge reached out his hand to shield Amelia, who had shut her eyes in anticipation of getting splashed. She hadn’t noticed at the time, but he had been right next to her. There had been a large male student in front of him, so even the other girls hadn’t noticed him until he’d intervened.

The reenactment magic disappeared. After a long pause, Julius muttered, “I see.”

His cold voice was quite frightening, but what really made Amelia and the other girls shiver was the disappearance of the usually ever-present gentle smile on Sarge’s face.

Sarge most resembled his beautiful mother the queen, and his good looks made him stand out even among his four brothers. His handsome features were like a doll’s, so overwhelmingly awe-inspiring in spite of his gentle expression. So when that smile disappeared, his beauty turned intimidating, and it sent a chill down their spines.

Even Amelia felt that way, despite the fact that his hostility wasn’t directed at her, so the other girls must have been frightened into silence.

“It seems it’s true that you didn’t mean to harm Sarge, but it was a lie that your hand slipped. You lied about what happened, and you purposely tried to harm another student on school grounds. That cannot be overlooked. You’ll hear about your punishment later. You are dismissed.”

“N-No...”

“Please, forgive us, we...”

The word “punishment” brought the girls to their senses, and they desperately tried to make excuses, but Julius’s bodyguards forcefully ushered them out of the room.

Having missed her opportunity to leave, Amelia averted her gaze, unsure of what to do.

“Well, that was a disaster,” said Julius. As he watched the disappearing figures of the girls and the bodyguards, his voice turned friendly. “But the most important thing is that you weren’t hurt. But why do those girls hold such animosity towards you?”

“I don’t know... I’ve never even seen them before,” Amelia answered honestly.

Julius’s expression became serious. “Recently, there have been some terrible rumors floating around school. I was just thinking I should investigate.”

“Terrible rumors...?”

Clearly, they were rumors that had to do with her situation.

“Now then, Amelia.”

In contrast with his usual friendly way of talking, his voice took on an air of gravity.

“Yes, Prince Julius.” Amelia immediately straightened her posture, bowed her head, and awaited his next words.

“In order to ascertain the truthfulness of these unsettling rumors going around school, I have some things to ask you.”

“Yes, understood.”



When Amelia raised her head, she noticed that Sarge was looking at Julius with a strange expression.

Furthermore, he went so far as to ask, "Brother, what are these unsettling rumors?"

"It's all anyone is talking about, and you still haven't heard about it?"

Sarge merely nodded at Julius's astounded question.

"Then why did you approach Amelia?"

"I didn't want to bother with the welcome party, but when I gave my guard the slip and made to return home, I saw Amelia."

He said that she'd looked so lonely by herself that he'd wanted to help her. It seemed he had merely done it out of the kindness of his heart.

"Afterwards, I found out she was the daughter of Count Lenia, so I wanted to ask her some things. I also just enjoy talking to her."

"So basically, you weren't trying to find out whether there was any truth to the rumor—you just wanted to become friends with her?"

Sarge nodded, and Julius looked shocked for a moment, but then he whispered something.

"Maybe this is a good opportunity. If he keeps shaking off his guards..."

"Brother?"

"I think it's great that you've become friends with Amelia. All you do is study magic and botany."

Julius, looking back and forth between Amelia and Sarge, had suddenly put on the face of an older brother concerned about his younger brother.

"But nevertheless, Amelia has a fiancé at the moment. If the two of you spend time alone together, her reputation will continue to suffer for it. Make sure to bring your guards along whenever you meet with her."

"I know. I don't want to cause her any trouble."

It was likely that Julius was using Amelia to stop Sarge from moving around without his bodyguards. However, after that exchange, Julius looked at Amelia a bit guiltily. Considering that it was dangerous for royalty to walk around without their guards even on school grounds, Amelia was glad she could be used as a pretext to make Sarge keep his guards close.

At that thought, she smiled, which made Julius open his eyes wide in surprise. Then his expression softened.

"Thank you, Amelia. Please take good care of Sarge."

"Oh, um, of course. I should be the one thanking you."

It sounded like a heavy responsibility, but since Julius had asked

her directly, she felt that was the only way she could respond.

“More importantly, I have something I need to ask my brother,” said Sarge, his expression changed.

“What is it? You’re going to scare the ladies with a face like that. I told you to look calm.”

With a start, Sarge shifted his gaze to Amelia, who slowly shook her head as Sarge made an effort to restore his usual gentle smile to his face.

“I’m fine. You don’t have to smile for my sake.”

“I see. Well, if Amelia says so, then...”

The smile that then appeared on his face was utterly natural and all the more captivatingly beautiful for it.

“When you think about it, it doesn’t really matter if I scare a lady I have no connection to.”

“No, it does matter. At the very least, you should be trying to put up a good front.” Julius sighed deeply, his eyes fixed on Sarge and Amelia. “So, Sarge. You wanted to ask me something?”

“It’s about Amelia. You said she has a fiancé ‘at the moment.’ And you also said ‘her reputation will continue to suffer.’ Why did you say those things?”

“Ah...”

Sarge had said that he’d started talking to Amelia because he wanted to be friends with her. That statement was so shocking to her that she had completely missed the important implications of his brother’s words.

“I would also like to know. Ever since arriving in the royal capital, I’ve felt like I have no idea what is going on.”

Surely Julius would know everything.

Frankly speaking, if Reese no longer wanted to meet with Amelia, that was fine. She wanted to tell her father everything and leave the rest up to him. Her father probably wouldn’t be quick to let go of Reese, who could use earth magic, but she wanted to make it clear that Reese was the one at fault. That was what she had in mind, but it was still dreadful to have people she didn’t even know harbor such ill will towards her. If she could have solved the problem, she would have, but regardless, she at least wanted to know the reason.

She asked her question with that in mind, and Julius nodded and asked her various questions in turn. “Your fiancé is Reese, the second son of Marquis Thurma, correct?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“...Last spring. I was seeing him off to the royal capital, since he was going to attend the academy. I tried to meet with him at school and even put in a request, but that didn’t happen, as he was too busy.”

Amelia answered each question honestly.

“Did you exchange letters?”

“I sent him several letters, and he responded twice. Each time he just said he was too busy to write.”

“I see...” Julius crossed his arms, deep in thought.

After Julius had been silent for a long time, Sarge said, “Brother, please just tell Amelia what is going on. All this questioning followed by the silent treatment will just make her more anxious.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry. Okay, I’ll explain.”

The story that Julius proceeded to explain was completely unbelievable.

Last year, around summer time, Reese had become close with a girl. She was the daughter of Viscount Caria, and her name was Sarah.

Apparently, Reese had fallen deeply in love with Sarah and, finding it difficult to continue his engagement to Amelia, he had asked that her father break off their engagement.

However, Amelia had not only denied Reese what he wanted, she had rebuked him for his change of heart and had even gone so far as to send a letter to Sarah severely disparaging her.

“Reese never said anything like that...” said Amelia, forgetting to put up a polite front.

She was surprised to hear that he had found someone he loved and that he was thinking of breaking off their engagement. But what was even more astounding was the claim that Amelia had refused to acknowledge his wishes and had not only thrown verbal abuse at him but harassed his would-be fiancée. That was surely the reason the academy students stared at Amelia and whispered about her.

The Kingdom of Bedeiht’s nobility mostly engaged in political marriages, but there were still many among the youth who yearned for marriages of love. Also, in recent years, there had been stories of lower-ranking nobles and those who weren’t in the line of succession marrying their school sweethearts. There were sure to be many students secretly rooting for Reese, who had thrown away everything for the one he loved.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to her, Amelia had become the villain in this scenario, having supposedly insulted Reese after he wanted to end their engagement and gotten in the way of his newfound love, even after he had sincerely talked to her about the situation.

But Reese had never sent anything like a request to end their engagement.

Amelia’s father hadn’t said anything about the earth magic user, whom he so desperately wanted to welcome as his son-in-law, asking to end their engagement. If Reese had really told him that, then never mind the question of whether or not she would accept it, Reese should

have told them before she'd left for the capital.

So why had things turned out this way?

"You really don't know anything?" asked Julius after giving the details. He was looking at Amelia with concern.

"No. I didn't know that Reese wanted to end our engagement or anything..."

But it was surely true that the reason he'd stopped contacting her was because he had fallen in love with that girl.

If that was the case, she wished he could have just told her, instead of deceiving her by saying he was busy.

"Why would Reese lie about me disparaging and harassing his girlfriend...?" Upset, Amelia was determined to ask Reese directly. "Thank you for telling me about this. I think I'll ask Reese why things turned out this way."

After she'd said her thanks and made to stand up, Sarge stopped her. "I don't think you should do that, Amelia," he said. "If you press him for answers, he'll just be able to carry on with his lies about you. That's probably what he wanted to happen when he started spreading these rumors. It'd be better to remain calm and not give in to what he wants."

Hearing that reasoning, Amelia abandoned her plan.

It was likely just as Sarge said. If she went after Reese like that, he would probably just apologize. From an outsider's perspective, Amelia would look as though she were hounding Reese because she didn't like that he was ending their engagement, in line with the rumors he'd been circulating.

Amelia took several deep breaths. "You're right. Thank you."

She had been close to playing right into Reese's hand.

"So does this mean most of the students at school believe the rumor that's been spreading?" muttered Sarge with a hardened expression.

"That's what it seems like. I can't believe such a baseless rumor has gained this much traction. Plus, no one has even bothered to ask Amelia directly about it." Julius also looked quite grave.

Amelia had just realized what a terrifying thing this was.

Someone with bad intentions spread a groundless rumor, and that rumor became reality. Things would have been fine if it were just a love affair between two nobles of the kingdom. However, in order to further magical research within the country, there were also exchange students from other countries attending the academy. If they became involved in this kind of affair, it would become an international issue.

"This isn't a matter of concern only for the people involved. Since it's not good for the royal family to interfere with marriages among the nobility, I was just watching in wait, but now that things have

reached this point, I can't stand idly by anymore. I'll carry out an investigation at once and bring the truth to light," said Julius, inspiring Amelia to do what she could as well.

"I'll also try asking my father again if he's received anything from Reese."

If Reese had actually requested to break off their engagement, she didn't think her father would have hidden that from her. But her father wanted earth magic to return to their lands more than anyone. With that thought in mind, she felt it was best to make absolutely certain he hadn't heard from Reese.

Suddenly, Sarge, who had been silently listening to the discussion between the other two, asked Amelia, "You're in the A class, aren't you, Amelia? Could you tell me what your classmates' attitudes are towards you?"

Julius looked startled by the question, and he turned a serious gaze on Amelia.

"My...classmates?"

"It's important. Please tell me exactly."

Amelia answered honestly: they ignored her even when she tried to speak to them, and they withheld important information from her.

At Amelia's words, Julius sank into silence, his expression remaining serious, while Sarge looked angry.

"My brother's prospective fiancée is in your class," explained Sarge, and Julius nodded.

"Yes, she's the daughter of Marquis Keadly. I was planning to decide on a fiancée after I graduate. We've investigated her family background and she's the only acceptable candidate so far."

"...Lady Emilla, right?"

That was the beautiful red-haired girl who had looked down on Amelia from the very first day.

Come to think of it, she was consistently the center of attention in class, surrounded by other girls who fawned over her. Her family must have wielded considerable influence. And if Emilla was Julius's fiancée-to-be, then that would only add to it.

However, Julius said flatly, "If she is one of the people feeding that rumor behind your back, then I'll have to drop her as a potential fiancée."

"What...?"

"Power brings with it great responsibility. Someone who does not understand that isn't fit to be the wife of royalty."

He was right, of course.

And yet Amelia couldn't help but feel guilty that her words might change Emilla's future.

"Don't worry. He doesn't intend to move forward on your word

alone. He'll conduct a thorough investigation and verify it with this reenactment magic," said Sarge, sensing Amelia's unease.

"Reenactment magic..."

It was definitely a terrifyingly effective form of magic.

"I never knew that kind of magic existed," said Amelia.

Julius nodded. "It's not just you. I doubt any of the academy's students know about it. Up to now, it's only been requested by the knights for matters like searching for missing persons or clearing false charges. Only the higher-ups in the nobility and the knighthood know about it. I never thought I'd have to use it for something like this."

"...I see."

"That's how malicious this case is. I want to prove your innocence, but it might take some time for me to complete the investigation. Things might be difficult in the meantime, but..."

"Understood. I'll be fine," replied Amelia, with a resolve that surprised even herself.

She had spent so long not understanding Reese's true intentions, nor why she was so hated. But finally, the reason had become clear.

While her fiancé's betrayal was hurtful, she would have suffered even more if she had married him without knowing how unfaithful he was.

"We should hurry as much as we can. Oh, right, the lunch break is about to end. Sorry for taking so much of your time."

"Not at all. I have you to thank for telling me about what was going on with Reese."

If she hadn't met with these two, her ignorance would have led her to do exactly what Reese was expecting her to do.

Julius, who still had some things left to do, stayed behind, so she and Sarge exited the student council room.

"Um, Sarge..." Amelia looked up at him; she had one more thing she needed to say. "Thank you for protecting me in the dining hall." She bowed her head.

Even though he had been healed with magic, it still must have been painful. Sarge smiled kindly at her apology and thanks.

"I'm glad you didn't get hurt."

Finding herself becoming captivated by his beautiful smile, Amelia hurriedly looked away.



“Um, about the matter you brought up before... I actually recorded the data about the new grain variety’s growth, insect damage, and crop yield. If you wanted, I could...”

“You’d let me see it?” said Sarge in an uncharacteristically loud voice, seizing Amelia’s hands.

He was even more overjoyed than she had imagined, and Amelia also nodded happily.

“Yes, of course!”

Originally, she had prepared that data for Reese. She had set it aside for him after he hadn’t returned to her family’s domain during the summer despite saying he would. But he probably didn’t even want to read it anymore. Now Sarge would happily take the materials she had thought would go to waste.

Reese... You said you wanted to know everything about how the grains were growing...

Now that things had come to this point, she no longer felt any lingering attachment to him. But it wasn’t so simple to let go of all the time they had spent together and all the prospects for the future they had held.

She cast her eyes downward, on the verge of tears.

“Amelia?”

Hearing him say her name with so much worry, she hastily plastered a smile on her face.

“Since it’s data I wrote up, it might not be entirely accurate.”

“Not at all—it will be a great help. Thank you.”

“I’ll bring it tomorrow. Um, where should I bring it?”

She thought she’d probably have to bring it to the student council room, but Sarge’s response was unexpected.

“I’ll come by your class at the end of the day to pick it up. There will probably be some things I want to ask you about, anyway.”

“Huh? You’ll come to my class?”

She hadn’t expected that Sarge would take the trouble to come to her, but he seemed to take her words to mean that she didn’t want him to come to her classroom.

“I won’t be coming alone to ask you questions, of course. I’ll bring my guards along with me.”

Amelia’s reputation was currently at its lowest point, all because of Reese. Despite that, Sarge’s concern made her so happy that she unconsciously gave him a genuine smile as she nodded.

“Right. I’m looking forward to it.”

It would also give Julius some peace of mind that Sarge would be bringing his guards around with him.

Soon the lunch break would be over.

Amelia split from Sarge halfway and wavered about whether she should go to the dining hall, but she no longer felt like eating.

She decided to head back to the classroom without lunch and wait for class to start. Just a little bit ago, she'd felt it would be painful even to be around her classmates, but after learning the reasoning behind this whole thing, she no longer felt it was a big deal.

Those girls had decided, shortly after enrolling in school, that the rumors that had spread in Amelia's absence were fact and judged her as someone who deserved to be bullied.

The price of their misjudgment was much larger than they had been anticipating. Amelia felt a bit guilty when she reflected that she was the cause of their misfortune. However, the real culprit was Reese, who had started that rumor to rationalize his affair.

Several of her classmates returned to the classroom, and seeing that Amelia had returned on her own, they began laughing and whispering. Looking closer, she saw that in the middle of those students was Julius's potential fiancée, Lady Emilla Keadly, the daughter of a marquis.

Remembering what she had heard in the student council room, Amelia looked at her with mixed emotions. Emilla, surrounded by many other girls, was glancing over at Amelia and laughing snidely.

"She's being such a bother to her fiancé, and yet she's still clinging to that position. How disgraceful. If it were me, I'd be prepared to step aside rather than cause Julius any trouble."

Such a remark made Amelia unconsciously react with shock. Emilla had likely said that in an effort to denigrate Amelia.



But the words that came out of Emilla's mouth were things she really should not have said.

Now that she's said that...

Although it seemed the students of the academy still did not know, Julius could use reenactment magic to see images of the past with perfect clarity. And just a moment ago, he had said he wanted to investigate Emilla's behavior.

So she really should not have been saying things like that.

Amelia thought she should caution Emilla about her words, but Emilla surely would not heed her advice. The situation might instead escalate, with Emilla saying worse and worse things. If that happened, then Amelia's attempts to help her would only drive her into a corner.

"That is so like you, Lady Emilla."

"Only you are worthy of Prince Julius, Lady Emilla."

All the young ladies surrounding Emilla praised her so. Unable to bear looking at them any longer, Amelia silently shut her eyes.

You reap what you sow, so you should always live your life showing kindness and honesty towards others. That was what Amelia's mother always told her. She had never felt the truth of those words more than she did now.

Amelia tried determinedly not to think of the snickering girls, instead trying to turn her thoughts elsewhere.

Oh, that's right. I need to organize those documents for Sarge before tomorrow, since he wants to look them over. He probably wants to compare with the regular crop data as well, so I should prepare that too.

Amelia opened her notebook, and while she was writing down what she would need to do after returning to her dorm room, the afternoon class started.

Time passed quickly as she concentrated on the lesson. She decided to return to her dorm quickly once class ended.

If she stayed in the classroom for too long, something needlessly troublesome was bound to happen. Plus, she had to prepare the documents to hand over to Sarge tomorrow, so time was of the essence. She hurriedly gathered her things and exited the classroom.

As she was about to pass by the entrance to the library, a student emerged from inside.

"Ah, pardon me."

She avoided bumping into them, but the other person seemed very alarmed, and they moved to shield the girl that was with them. Amelia was in such a hurry that she merely gave a slight bow and passed them by.

It wasn't until she'd returned to her dorm, changed her clothes, and begun preparing the documents that she gave a start.

Wait... Was the person coming out of the library just then Reese...?

She had only glanced at them, so she couldn't be entirely sure.

But the person had been a tall young man with gold-colored hair, and he'd moved forward to protect the girl behind him. Could that girl have possibly been Reese's girlfriend?

Yes, that was Reese... I think.

The two had met by chance for the first time in a year.

Since he had been trying so hard to avoid Amelia, he probably hadn't thought he would see her at the library.

Since she'd been walking fast to return to her dorm, he might have gotten the mistaken impression that she had heard the two of them were in the library and gone there to question him.

That must have been why he had tried so hard to shield the other girl.

But since Amelia had been in a hurry, she hadn't even noticed Reese, so she'd just bowed in apology for almost running into them and then rushed past.

Surely, he must have been disappointed by that.

Thinking that, Amelia couldn't help but laugh.

That was when she realized she no longer held one shred of affection for Reese.

They'd had plans to share their roles equally and spend the future together. But their roles as each other's betrothed were now behind them.

Their engagement hadn't been formally broken off yet, but since Reese was vilifying Amelia for his girlfriend's sake, she felt so little concern for him that she could pass him by without even noticing him.

With things being this way, she was starting to wish the two of them could end their engagement as soon as possible. But their engagement was a decision made by Marquis Thurma and Count Lenia. Even if Amelia and Reese disliked each other so much that they couldn't stand to look at each other's faces, it wasn't something that could be called off so easily.

Oh, right. I have to make sure my father hasn't received any correspondence about ending our engagement from Reese.

In a rush, Amelia wrote her father a letter.

She kept the contents simple, asking only if he had received a letter from Reese. She had a lot she wanted to write, but there was still a slight possibility that her father had completely disregarded any attempts at contact from Reese. First, she had to make sure that wasn't the case.

That should do it.

After finishing her succinct letter, she began putting together the

documents.

She did not dislike this sort of work—creating and comparing data. She worked silently until she suddenly felt hungry and then took a break. Now that she thought about it, she remembered she hadn't even eaten lunch. She had to at least have a proper dinner.

The dorm had a simple kitchen and also a dining hall similar to that of the academy.

Amelia had not brought a maid from back home with her to the academy. Having been raised in the countryside, Amelia could do most things on her own. However, she didn't feel inclined to make dinner right now, so she decided to go to the dining hall. It was a little late, so it should have been empty.

Thinking that, she opened the door to her room when someone who seemed to have been passing by the room stopped, startled. As she thought about how many people she'd nearly run into that day, she left her room and headed towards the dining hall without giving much of a reaction. The person had stopped for a moment, then seemed to enter the room next door.

Amelia leisurely ate her dinner in the nearly empty dining hall, then went back to her room to continue creating the reference materials.

Before she knew it, she had a large pile of documents in front of her, so she tried to put them in order to make them easier to read.

"I think this will be sufficient to give to Sarge."

Amelia was satisfied with the easy-to-understand, quality materials she had made. Later, she would give them to Sarge to aid in his research.

The next day.

Amelia headed towards the academy, her completed documents in hand.

The amount of paper turned out to be fairly heavy, so she had put them into a larger bag meant for documents. She would just hand him the bag itself when he came to her classroom at the end of the day.

That was her plan, but Emilla had apparently grown interested in the bag Amelia was carrying so carefully.

When Amelia left the classroom for lunch, the bag disappeared.

She looked at Emilla, thinking she couldn't possibly have done it, and the latter was looking out at the courtyard, giggling. Seeing that gave Amelia a bad feeling. She hurried to the window to check and saw her bag submerged in the middle of the fountain.

Emilla laughed with glee as she saw Amelia gasp.

Some of the other students in class were looking on uneasily, but they didn't dare go against Emilla.

Isn't this just a bit too much...?

Even if Amelia had told Reese she didn't want to end their engagement, that was a problem between just the two of them. At most, the only other person involved would be Reese's girlfriend. And yet there were really people out there capable of doing such a cruel thing to someone who was simply the subject of an unpleasant rumor.

Power brings with it great responsibility. Someone who does not understand that is not fit to be the wife of royalty.

Julius's words were undoubtedly correct.

Amelia no longer held the faint feelings of guilt she'd felt towards Emilla. If Julius dropped her as his prospective fiancée, then so be it.

Sighing, Amelia walked to the courtyard.

Without a doubt, it was her bag submerged in the water.

Amelia didn't hesitate; she plunged her hand into the fountain and picked up her bag.

Water dripped onto her uniform, but she paid it no mind. She checked the contents of the bag and saw that all her documents were soaked and illegible.

These won't do...

Thankfully, these were clean copies she had prepared specifically to give to Sarge. The originals were still back in her dorm room, so she hadn't actually lost any of the data itself. But still, she wouldn't be able to keep her promise to give them to Sarge today.

Naturally, she was also sad about all the hard work she had put in to consolidate all those materials yesterday going to waste.

"Are you all right, miss?"

Amelia raised her head as someone suddenly called out to her. It was a lone young lady looking at her with a worried expression. She seemed like an upperclassman.

Slender and tall, with wavy, silver-colored hair and violet eyes, she was compellingly beautiful.

"Even your uniform has gotten wet. Did something happen?" she asked in a kind, concerned voice.

"When I left my classroom for lunch, my bag went missing, so I went to go find it," Amelia answered honestly. The girl looked at Amelia and the dripping wet bag she held in her hand, then furrowed her brow.



"This is awful. I can't believe someone who attends the Royal Academy of Magic would do something so horrible. What class are you in?"

"I'm in the first year A class."

"The A class? There's someone who would do something so terribly immature in the highest-achieving class?" asked the girl, looking upset. "Do you know who might have done this?"

"...I only have a guess, so I can't say."

She had no doubt it was Emilla, but she didn't think Emilla herself had come all the way to the courtyard to throw the bag into the fountain. Which meant someone else had actually carried out the deed.

"I see. So then why? There must be some reason for this to happen, right?"

"It's because I'm Amelia Lenia."

That was the only reason.

This girl must have also been aware of the rumors circulating around school. Amelia heard her let out an exasperated sigh.

"So that's it, hm? I've heard the rumors too. But that has nothing to do with your classmates, now, does it?"

"I would think not."

"Exactly. I think it has absolutely nothing to do with them," she said; evidently she shared Amelia's feelings regarding the matter.

The girl even went on to dry Amelia's uniform and bag with wind magic.

"Thank you so much."

"I'm sorry, I'm unable to restore your documents to their original state."

"No, you've already done so much. Really, thank you very much."

Since Amelia had been surrounded only by spite, this girl's kindness made a deep impression.

"My name is Marie Edori. I'm a second-year," she said.

"A second-year..."

"Yes, that's right. I'm in the same year as your fiancé, Reese."

Even Amelia knew about the Count of Edori.

Their domain was famous for its valuable ore-rich mines. They were quite an affluent family and even owned an extravagant mansion in the royal capital.

Amelia would never have thought the daughter of such a family would be this nice to her.

"Thank you for everything," she said, bowing her head once more.

Seeing her do that, Marie said, in a quiet voice, "You really are nothing like the rumors. I don't think you're the type of person Reese

says you are.”

Although they were in different classes, Marie and Reese were in the same year, so she knew him well.

“When we were first-years, we were in the A class together. At first, he was very studious, determined to work hard at magic for his future plans.”

The Reese Amelia knew was certainly that kind of person.

“However, around summertime, he met that Viscountess Sarah Caria. After that, he stopped putting effort into his classes. When he became a second-year, he fell down to the C class.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Reese hadn’t been busy with his studies at all; he had been completely absorbed with Sarah.

Marie went on to say that, if one were to start in the C class, that was just a matter of aptitude and there wasn’t much one could do about it, but falling from the A class to the C class was rather disgraceful.

“I think it’s fate that we’ve met like this. I don’t like what Reese is doing. Please let me know if there’s anything I can possibly do for you.”

“...Thank you,” said Amelia, bowing her head. She was coming to realize that the academy wasn’t filled only with enemies.

She wasn’t planning on casually asking for Marie’s help, but the fact that Marie had offered brought Amelia some relief as she headed back to the classroom.

Even after having been dried, her bag was stiff and would not return to normal. The documents inside were also in a pitiful state.

Emilla watched Amelia with a sneer as the latter sat down at her desk. Amelia sighed as she checked the contents of her bag. Were her classmates really unable to go against Emilla? She was, after all, the prospective fiancée of Third Prince Julius, and her family also held considerable power. Compared to her, Amelia was a just friendless rural noble who was the subject of some terrible gossip.

Emilla must have made Amelia the target of her tyranny with that in mind.

However, what she did not know was whom those documents had been meant for, nor that Amelia had already met Julius and Sarge, nor that they had acknowledged her as their friend.

When class ended, Sarge would be coming to the classroom to pick up the documents. With her feelings of guilt towards Emilla long gone, Amelia planned to tell Sarge everything.

The teacher announced the end of class with a hoarse voice.

All the students immediately got up from their seats and gathered

in various places throughout the classroom, chatting cheerfully with each other. When someone bragged about something, everyone else would immediately praise them.

This was how one learned to survive in this aristocratic society.

Magic was not the only thing to be learned at this academy.

Amelia remained in her seat, quietly waiting for Sarge to arrive. Unable to join in on any conversations, she felt the condescending glares of those around her.

Although her family's business was important, she was living in an aristocratic society, so it was also important to be social. It was an exclusive society that thoroughly detested anyone who deviated from its expectations. Having lived in the countryside, Amelia didn't understand in detail, but the nobility who lived in the royal capital must have had those mores instilled in them for a long time.

Amelia had been unreasonably isolated due to Reese's actions, and that isolation had caused the group to shun her. And yet, she had been able to meet people like Marie, Julius, and Sarge. If she hadn't met them, she would have spent her three years at the academy in complete despair.

Suddenly, the classmates surrounding her began to stir.

When she raised her face, there was a lone young man standing at the entrance to the classroom. He was very tall, had red hair, and seemed to be in his midtwenties.

Instead of a student uniform, he was wearing a knight's uniform. Since he was carrying a sword within the academy, he must have been an official royal escort.

Amelia remembered Julius telling Sarge he should change his bodyguard. Since he had a bad habit of often moving around on his own, it seemed they had finally engaged a real knight to be his guard.

The red-haired knight stood at the doorway, surveying the classroom. His eyes, the same red as his hair, spotted Amelia among the students.

Amelia stood up, clutching her ruined bag, and Sarge appeared from behind the knight and walked towards Amelia.

"Apologies for keeping you waiting, Amelia."

In place of his usual calm expression, Sarge had happily called out Amelia's name, causing her classmates to stir even more.

She heard someone say, "Why her?"

It was probably Emilla.

"Your Highness, I believe I requested that you allow me to confirm the area is safe before stepping in front of me," admonished the red-haired knight from behind him, but Sarge seemed not to have heard.

"Sarge..." said Amelia, in an unconsciously chiding tone, making

Sarge look a little sheepish.

“I was just looking forward to seeing your data. I acted unintentionally. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

At Sarge’s words, the red-haired knight opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“I never thought I’d see the day when His Highness actually heeded someone’s advice...” he muttered, looking at Amelia imploringly.

Sarge’s guard must really have been having a difficult time.

“I must apologize. The documents I was meant to give you are...”

Amelia placed the bag, which she had been clutching to her chest, on her desk, and her classmates, who had apparently been paying attention to them, gasped.

They hadn’t expected that those documents were meant for Sarge.

“How did this happen?” asked Sarge, looking at the ruined bag.

Amelia hesitated, uncertain how best to answer that question.

If she told him she had carelessly dropped it herself, she was sure Sarge would forgive her.

But she felt like she could no longer take this one-sided hatred.

It was true that it was important in an aristocratic society to conform to the strict hierarchy and to cooperate with others. However, as Julius and Sarge feared, the fact that such a baseless rumor had spread so far was a problem, even if it was just within the academy.

That was why she had resolved to tell him everything.

Besides, she could not lie to Sarge, a member of royalty.

“I left my desk for lunch, and when I came back, my bag was submerged in the fountain in the courtyard,” she explained slowly and calmly, even while considering the repercussions of her statement.

Amidst the noisy classroom, Sarge’s face grew stern.

“You left it in this classroom?”

“Yes, that’s right.” She quietly bowed her head in assent.

“That’s a lie!” Amelia heard someone shout, denying her words.

She looked back to see Emilla, surrounded by other girls, scowling at her.

“Sarge, please, don’t let her deceive you! She’s only saying that to get attention from you!”

Rather than owning up to her misdeed, she was blaming Amelia.

“She threw her own bag into the fountain. You all saw it too, didn’t you?”

The girls surrounding Emilla looked at each other, at a loss as Emilla sought their agreement. If they said they’d seen it, they would be lying to Sarge, and if they said they hadn’t, they would incur Emilla’s displeasure.

“Hurry up and answer, you lot!”

“I saw it too.”

“Yes, that is what happened.”

In the face of Emilla’s irritation, only two girls in her entourage spoke up in agreement. Those two would likely become entangled in whatever trouble Emilla found herself in.

Amelia felt sorry for the girls, whose enrollment in the A class was proof they were exceptional, but since they’d prioritized Emilla over Sarge, there was nothing to be done.

Although it was Lady Emilla, the candidate for Julius’s fiancée, who was the one to testify that Amelia was lying.

Curious as to how Sarge would react, Amelia covertly looked up towards him.

When she did so, she saw that he had seemingly not even heard Emilla’s words and was perusing the documents that he’d pulled from Amelia’s bag.

“These are illegible now...”

“I’m sorry. Someone who happened to be by the fountain dried them with wind magic, but she wasn’t able to restore them completely.”

Sarge looked disappointed; he must really have been looking forward to the materials Amelia had prepared for him.

“Um, the original documents are back in my dorm room, so I can bring them again tomorrow.”

“It seems like a lot of work to recopy this amount of data again... Wind magic, hmm?”

“Sarge!”

Being completely ignored must have irritated Emilla; she rushed over to him with the intent of taking him by the arm.

But Sarge’s knight bodyguard thwarted her.

“You are forbidden to approach His Highness without permission.”

Even Emilla recoiled at being admonished so strongly and with such a fierce gaze.

“I-I am officially to become Julius’s fiancée next year. You are the one who should be standing down,” she said, glaring at him, after having collected herself. She was nothing if not proud.

After she nearly shouted those words, even Sarge, who had only been looking at Amelia and the documents, was forced to acknowledge Emilla’s presence.

“Oh, right. You are...”

“That’s right. I am Julius’s fiancée-to-be, Emilla Keadly.”

Emilla looked reassured now that Sarge’s document-engrossed gaze had finally turned to her.

“...Hmph.”

However, she was surprised at Sarge’s cold stare, and she looked around for help. Everyone else was seemingly too intimidated by Sarge’s unimaginably coldhearted expression, and no one got any closer to her.

“Kaid. Go fetch my brother. We’ll find out just who the culprit is here.”

The knight refused once, on the grounds that it was unthinkable for him to leave Sarge’s side.

However, after Sarge said he would go himself in that case, Kaid decided it would be best for Sarge to wait here rather than walk around the school grounds. He rushed out of the room and returned a short while later with Julius.

“Ah, Julius!”

Emilla ran over to him with relief. However, Julius, who had heard the details of what had transpired on the walk over, walked straight to Amelia.

“Huh? Julius?”

“Amelia, are these the documents in question?”

“Yes, that’s right. I had put them in this bag,” she said, holding it out. He took the bag and went to stand behind the teacher’s podium. Julius’s guards stood blocking the two entrances to the classroom.

“Everyone, please take your seats,” said Julius.

Since class had just ended, all the students were still in the classroom. They all sat at their desks, anxious at the thought of what was about to happen.

Sarge stood at the very back of the classroom with his knight escort.

On the platform, Julius placed Amelia’s bag on top of the podium, then looked over the classroom.

“This is your bag, Amelia, which was holding documents requested by Sarge. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that is correct,” Amelia answered. Julius nodded in acknowledgment.

“Then how did it end up like this?”

“I left the classroom for lunch. Then, when I returned, it was submerged in the fountain.” She gave the same response she’d given to Sarge, prompting Emilla to stand up.

“Come now, are you intent on telling that lie not just to Sarge but even to Julius? We even saw you do it yourself!”

“Emilla, I don’t remember giving you permission to speak. Sit down.”

“...Y-Yes.”

Emilla’s expression stiffened at Julius’s cold words, and she sat

down awkwardly. It seemed she would obediently listen to him.

“Right now, it’s Amelia’s word against Emilla’s. Is there anyone who can testify for either of them?”

From her seat, Emilla glared at the two girls from earlier. With pale faces, those two stood up, trembling.

“You witnessed Amelia drop her bag in the fountain?”

“That’s correct.”

“Yes, I witnessed it...”

The two both gave their responses; there was no going back for them.

Surely, what would happen now would be a repeat of the incident at the dining hall.

Amelia silently cast her eyes down.

She wasn’t thinking of giving them a pass for maliciously trying to hurt her, but knowing what was to come, she felt a little sympathy for them.

Julius looked around the classroom, then announced in a quiet voice, “Now then, to ascertain the truth, I will use reenactment magic.”

“...Reenactment magic?”

The classroom grew noisy at his declaration. It seemed none of her classmates, Emilla included, knew what that entailed.

“Yes. It’s a type of light magic. I can project an image of the past using magic. Normally, you would never come across something like this. It’s mainly used to expose crimes.”

Only the royal family was privy to the particulars of light magic. That was why it was difficult to know what kinds of magic the royal family had mastered. Furthermore, Julius said that until now, he hadn’t used this type of magic at the academy, so it made sense that no one here had heard of reenactment magic.

“Th-That can’t be...”

One of the girls who had testified on Emilla’s behalf turned white and almost collapsed, but Julius quickly cast healing magic and revived her.

He wasn’t going to let her escape.

As for Emilla, she had turned paler than anyone else.

Unlike in the student council room, there was no screen here. Julius turned around, looked at the blackboard, and muttered, “This’ll do.”

Suddenly, an image appeared there. It was the classroom just after the end of the morning class. It was like seeing an image from the point of view of the teacher’s podium.

Several students exiting the classroom for lunch came into view.

Amelia was sitting in the very back of class, taking her time as she removed the documents from her bag to check them. Then, she looked at the time and put the documents back into her bag before leaving the classroom to head to the dining hall.

Some time passed, and then Emilla and her entourage returned to the classroom, probably just having finished lunch.

Her followers crowded around her, agreeing with every little thing she said and showering her with admiration.

Emilla smiled in good humor, then suddenly shifted her gaze towards Amelia's seat.

"She really just rubs me the wrong way. She got the top grades in our year, and now she's acting like she's the perfect little student. And yet underneath it all, she's doing such nasty things."

Those around her immediately knew to whom she was referring.

"Speaking of which, I heard she ambushed Reese at the library yesterday."

"That's right. Sarah was scared out of her wits."

"I heard she told Reese to hurry up and break it off with Sarah."

When she heard those words, Amelia's eyes opened wide.

Huh? That short encounter from yesterday turned into such a rumor?

She'd just bowed and passed them by, only realizing it was Reese after returning to her dorm. Even if someone had witnessed that exchange, there was no way they could have come to that conclusion.

So it's all Reese's doing.

That was enough to convince her that Reese was purposely damaging Amelia's reputation.

She wondered what had made Reese change so much.

She didn't even feel sad about it anymore; she just wanted to break off their engagement as soon as possible, just like he so desired.

But that all depended on her father.

"Hey, go throw that bag into the fountain in the courtyard," ordered Emilla in the image, a malicious smile forming on her face.

The targets of her gaze were the two girls from earlier. Even as part of Emilla's entourage, they must have been comparatively low in status.

"B-But..."

"You want us to do that...?"

The two hesitated, but Emilla scowled at them, muttering that perhaps she ought to tell her father to stop doing business with their families, and the two girls reached for Amelia's bag. They left the classroom with the bag, and Emilla stayed behind, laughing mirthfully.

"I can't wait to see her face."

The image ended there.

Julius turned around slowly and stared at Emilla.

“No, that’s not...”

“How unfortunate, Emilla,” said Julius slowly, interrupting her attempt to form an excuse. “Well, this is an issue between academy students. You two were also threatened, it seems. If you sincerely apologize to Amelia, and if she forgives you, then this won’t become a big thing.”

As if clinging to Julius’s words, the two girls turned their entreating gazes towards Amelia.

It was unlikely that Emilla would apologize, but those two girls certainly would without a moment’s hesitation. Since those girls had been threatened by Emilla, Amelia intended to forgive them.

However, as if to block their gazes, Sarge stood in front of Amelia.

“Sarge?”

She’d felt the same way during the dining hall incident; since he usually looked so gentle, it was all the more frightening when he became angry.

“Oh, that’s right. Amelia was helping Sarge with his research. In that case, that makes this situation an obstruction of Sarge’s research.”

In concordance with his younger brother’s anger, Julius’s voice turned cold.

“Sarge’s research is invaluable to the national interest. What you’ve done is an obstruction to that, meaning we can’t end things here with apologies alone,” he said. It seemed he had never meant to overlook that matter.

“I really had no idea those documents had anything to do with Sarge’s research...” said Emilla tearfully.

At Julius’s words, Emilla finally seemed to understand the gravity of her actions. Her haughty attitude was gone, and she was looking at Julius and Sarge as if begging for forgiveness. She clasped her shaking hands tightly together.

She was in a pathetic state, one that was unimaginable given how she usually acted.

Yet Julius’s cold expression never wavered.

“That is likely true. But you did know that it was an important possession of Amelia’s. And that isn’t the only matter. You also forced two people to do your bidding, knowing they couldn’t refuse. And you held contempt for a classmate on the grounds of a completely baseless rumor. I am disappointed in you.”

“Julius, no...”

“You are no longer a candidate to be my fiancée. It seems you’ve labored under a misunderstanding: you were no more than a candidate in the first place. And you said it yourself, didn’t you? If you

were ever to cause trouble for me, you'd rather step aside."

Although he didn't show everyone that part, he must have known she'd said that through his reenactment magic.

Emilla had no more words, and no one was there to rush to her side as she crumpled to the ground.

"You two—I will tell you your punishment later."

That was the last thing he said, and without sparing Emilla another glance, he left the classroom with his guards in tow.

No one dared move, even after he'd taken his leave.

Emilla's sobs and those of the two other girls were the only sounds that echoed in the dead-silent classroom.

"Amelia."

Sarge was the first one to move among the motionless students.

He picked up Amelia's bag, which was still at the podium, then called out to her; she was still seated.

"Let's go to the castle."

"What? M-Me? To the royal castle?"

"Yes. My brother Est will surely be able to restore this."

Second Prince Est was a wind magic specialist.

Marie, who had kindly dried her soaked documents, had also used wind magic. Since Est could use light magic as well as wind, he could certainly restore them. But that meant she would have to go to the castle and meet Second Prince Est face-to-face. No matter how she thought about it, it seemed too much.

"O-Oh, no. I'll recopy them by tomorrow."

"It would be too much to rewrite all of this. Besides, there's something I want you to see."

When she continued to hesitate, he extended a hand to her. She could not ignore his hand, so she softly took it in her own, and he led her out of the classroom.

Following behind was the knight whom Sarge had called Kaid, and who for some reason seemed to be looking at Amelia with sympathy.

If they'd left her behind in that classroom, she would have been at a loss for what to do. It was probably for the best that they were taking her along with them.

And so Amelia and Sarge walked through the academy hand in hand.

She knew they were drawing attention, but she was so preoccupied with the fact that their hands were clasped together that it seemed a minor issue.

They got into a carriage bearing the royal family's coat of arms, and before she knew it, they were headed for the castle.

Coming from rural nobility, Amelia had never even attended a

dance party held at the castle. She never could have imagined her first visit would be under these circumstances.

They passed through the castle gates, heavily guarded by knights, which eventually led into a magnificent garden that stretched out on every side.

The countless blooming flowers were of course beautiful, but even more remarkably, there were varieties of flowers she had never seen before, and some that shouldn't have been able to bloom in this season. That wasn't all; in the very depths of the garden, she could see there weren't just flowers but a medicinal herb garden and a greenhouse.

"Sarge, that garden is..."

"Oh, yes, I've been doing some research there. Changing the soil seems to slightly change the flowers' characteristics as well, and even the season in which they can grow."

"Really? That's amazing."

She couldn't help staring at it. He was only doing research on flowers and medicinal herbs at the moment, but if he could apply his findings to grain, that would be truly ground-breaking.

"I'll show you next time. I'd love to hear your opinion about the new variety."

"The new variety... Then, Sarge, are you involved in the development of the cold-resistant grain?" asked Amelia.

Sarge nodded. "That's right. That's why I'm interested in the harvest and insect damage. I'm sorry if my mentioning it just brought up unpleasant emotions for you."

"No, that's fine. If anything..."

It was Emilla who had ended up worse off from that, after all.

"Amelia," Sarge called out to her in a kind voice, as if chiding her. "No matter how little, you should not become accustomed to unwarranted malice. If anything happens, I want you to tell me right away. I'll do my best to deal with it."

"...Thank you."

It had been incredibly difficult to endure the hostility of strangers, not to mention that it was the doing of her fiancé, whom she had thought she'd built a good, amicable relationship with.

And yet, she'd been able to meet people like Sarge and Julius, who were so kind as to care for her.

Every cloud has a silver lining. That was one of her mother's favorite sayings, and maybe she was right after all.

Finally, the carriage arrived at the castle.

Kaid descended from the carriage first and checked to make sure their surroundings were safe. Sarge followed after him, then turned around and held a hand out to Amelia.

“Th-Thank you.”

Several maids and attendants were lined up to greet Sarge, but they courteously bowed to Amelia as well.

Since this was her first time visiting, Amelia was overwhelmed by the size and magnificence of the royal castle as she walked inside with Sarge.

The wide corridor was sparkling clean, and a soft, easy-to-walk-on carpet was spread out on the floor.

Sunlight poured in through the large windows, illuminating the paintings and artwork displayed on the walls. It seemed magic was used to prevent any deterioration.

Sarge told the attendants who had come to greet him that he wanted a meeting with his brother Est. His request was immediately granted, and they quickly made their way to where Second Prince Est was.

Second Prince Est and Third Prince Julius had the same mother.

The present king had only one concubine in the first place, and she was the younger cousin of the queen, who was the mother of the crown prince and Sarge.

With the same father and mothers who were relatives, it was natural that the four brothers got along well.

“It’s rare to see you with a lady, Sarge.”

Amelia raised her face at the voice that had suddenly called out to them from up ahead.

A tall young man with the same golden-colored hair as Sarge raised his hand in a friendly manner, then began walking over to them.

His attire seemed easy to move around in, and he was carrying a wooden training sword, so he must have just come from the training grounds.

“Brother.”

Sarge’s words brought to light the fact that this man was the eldest of the four brothers, Crown Prince Alexis. Amelia managed to give a polite curtsy despite her fluster.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness. I am Amelia, daughter of Grond, Count of Lenia,” she said by way of introduction.

Alexis nodded with understanding. “Aha, so you are Countess Lenia, then?”

He shared Sarge’s beautiful features, but since he was tall and had a well-trained body, he also had an intimidating air.

Speaking of which, His Highness the Crown Prince specializes in offensive fire magic. I’ve heard he’s a first-rate swordsman who fights using swordsmanship and magic together.

And yet the eyes with which he was looking at his younger

brother were filled with kindness, making it clear how much he cared about his family.

“So, where are you headed to?”

“I’m going to see Est.”

Sarge told Alexis he was going to see Est to request that he restore the documents. Alexis seemed interested in that and said he would accompany them.

“I’m interested in just what kind of magic this restoration is.”

Together with the crown prince and Fourth Prince Sarge, they headed towards Second Prince Est.

Amelia walked, perplexed by this turn of events. Kaid was looking at her as he followed from behind with an expression like he felt sorry for her.

Then, as if that wasn’t enough...

“Alec, Sarge. Where are you two going?”

On the way there, they ran into Julius, who seemed to be on his way back from the academy.

“I thought Est could restore these documents for us.”

“It seems like interesting magic, so I decided to accompany them.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll come too.”

With Julius joining their party, they made their way to Est’s room.

“Well then, I shall remain out here,” said Kaid when they reached the front of the royal family’s living quarters.

“Huh?”

In spite of herself, Amelia looked at him with an entreating expression. The idea of being alone among royalty made her feel a bit helpless.

“You’re not coming with us?” Amelia asked in a whisper. Kaid gave her that same sympathetic look and shook his head silently.

“I do not have permission to enter.”

“But...”

If Kaid, who was Sarge’s knight escort, wasn’t allowed to enter, then it seemed to stand to reason that Amelia would of course also be barred from entering.

“If you ask Sarge for permission...”

He would surely grant him access. The moment she looked over her shoulder, however, Kaid disappeared.

He ran away? How sly... she thought, resenting him a bit for leaving so suddenly.

With no other choice, Amelia followed the three princes.

On the way, Julius spoke of his intention to remove Emilla from his list of prospective fiancées. Hearing the circumstances, Alexis nodded in agreement.

“This is certainly a crowd. I was told only Sarge would be

coming.”

Est had the same black hair as Julius, but his was long, and he had a mild-mannered atmosphere about him. Noticing that there was a petite girl with his brothers, his eyes widened in surprise.

Est’s room was a bit cramped, so they were led to a reception room within the castle’s living quarters, where a maid brewed them high-quality tea. Amelia gazed intently at the amber-colored tea as she listened to Sarge explain the situation. It seemed Est would restore her documents with wind magic here.

“This is quite a lot of material, isn’t it?” said Julius, impressed, as he arranged the documents.

“Est, how are you going to restore these papers?” asked Alexis. Est responded that he would use wind magic and then use light magic on top of that.

“A short time ago, Sarge and I tested it out together.”

That must have been why Sarge had been quick to suggest going to Est with this problem.

Est chanted a spell to cast wind magic, then used light magic.

Although it was generally necessary to chant a spell to use magic, it seemed that was not true of light magic. Est’s light magic must have been similar to Julius’s reenactment magic.

Just as she thought she saw the documents that were spread out in front of Julius glow faintly, one by one, they soon returned to their original state.

“That’s incredible,” muttered Amelia.

“This is superb,” said Alexis, picking up some documents. “I bet you could restore some old historical documents as well.”

“That’s right. I can even restore some of Julius’s old drawings from when he was a child,” said Est, laughing. Julius stood up, clearly agitated.

“No way, could you really...? No, that’s impossible... There’s no way you could do that...”

“I sure can. This is different from reenactment magic, which relies on memory. As long as the original exists, it’s possible. Mother has been taking good care of the bad drawings you tore up in embarrassment.”

Seeing Julius flustered was so strange, even Amelia couldn’t help but laugh.

Now that she felt her anxiety had lessened a bit, Amelia observed the four princes chatting easily with one another.

The eldest, Alexis, had luxurious golden hair and slightly tanned skin, which gave him a mature appeal. He was a prince with a majestic, imposing presence, and yet his eyes were filled with kindness and affection as he looked at his younger brothers.

The second eldest, Est, was a gentle, fragile-looking man. He was soft spoken and polite even to the daughter of a mere lord from the countryside. He treated his older brother, the crown prince, with respect and devotion, and his younger brothers with a mixture of kindness and severity.

Julius, the third brother, was a friendly and cheerful person. But, just as Amelia had witnessed multiple times, he was strict on not letting injustice and despicable behavior be overlooked. The only quality he seemed to share with his full brother, Est, was his hair color. He had a strong, stately build and looked more like Alexis. The two of them resembled their father, the king.

And then there was the youngest brother, Sarge.

He most resembled the beautiful queen. His features looked sculpted, and although he was royalty, deep down, he was a passionate researcher. Even now, he was looking intently at the materials Est had restored for Amelia.

“Lady Amelia,” said Alexis, looking kindly at Sarge. “If it’s not too much to ask of you, do you think you could help Sarge?”

“Yes, of course.”

If the data collected from her family’s domain could be of use to Sarge, Amelia would be delighted. With that thought in mind, she nodded emphatically.

“You have my thanks. You can use this room whenever you’d like. Later, we’ll issue you a permit to enter the castle.”

“Oh, n-no, there’s no need for you to go that far...”

Amelia thought she would just be able to help him at the academy. Not even high-ranking nobles could come and go from the castle as they pleased. But if she had a permit, Amelia could even enter unaccompanied.

“Sarge has always had a habit of getting so engrossed in his research on magic and botany that he even forgets to eat and sleep. He can’t be left alone,” said Est at Alexis’s side.

Julius also nodded. “If there were someone by his side, we’d be much more at ease.”

By that, they must have meant there was no significance in that person being Amelia. It was just that she could help with Sarge research, and he also felt at ease around her.

Based on that reasoning, she was able to agree.

“Yes. If you’ll allow me, I will do my absolute best to aid him,” she answered, then smiled.



The busy princes left one by one, and before she knew it, she was alone with Sarge. Yet he seemed unconcerned; he had been analyzing the data that entire time.

“Amelia, do you know what the rainfall was for this month?”

“Yes, it’s right here. I also recorded the temperature.”

Amelia had always liked compiling data like this. Her father, however, did not like dealing with detailed figures, so the data Amelia used to record in secret was now collecting dust in the estate’s warehouse. That was why she was so happy to see her materials be put to good use.

“I see. So last year’s temperatures were in fact lower than the year before, and the new variety’s yield increased.”

“That’s right. My family’s domain is quite far north, so there was a time when the cold destroyed everything. That being the case, some measures have been put in place to prepare for that risk to a certain extent, but in the case of the new variety...”

Suddenly, a knock came at the door to the reception room, and the two were brought back down to earth. Sarge answered the door, and in came Est. He took a look at the documents scattered around Amelia and Sarge and let out an exasperated laugh.

“I can’t believe you two have been here the whole time. It’s already evening.”

“It is?” Surprised, Amelia glanced out the window, and just as he had said, it was already pitch-black outside. “It’s already gotten so late... I was so absorbed in what we were doing, I completely lost track of time. I’m so sorry.”

Staying out overnight without permission was forbidden at the academy dorms, so Amelia began to panic.

“Julius has apparently given notice to your dorm, so you needn’t worry. Dinner is ready, so you two should come eat.”

“...Later,” said Sarge without taking his eyes off the materials in front of him. Est looked at Amelia.

“Lady Amelia is also present, so that won’t be allowed.”

At those words, Sarge gave a start. He turned his attention to Amelia, then began tidying up the documents.

“Understood. Amelia, shall we go?”

“Yes. Thank you for having me for dinner.”

Being allowed to dine at the royal castle was too great an honor, one she considered declining. But if she declined, then Sarge would also probably skip dinner.

“Lady Amelia is an important guest, after all.”

That seemed to be the response he wanted from Est, so Sarge smiled and nodded.

However...

Is everyone eating with us...?

They were led to the dining room; awaiting their arrival were Alexis, his wife the crown princess, and even Julius.

Alexis's wife, whom he had married last year, was Sophia, the daughter of Duke Pilet. She was a beautiful woman with silver hair, blue eyes, and a neat and tidy appearance. Amelia was in a panic, unsure of what to do, when Sophia called her over to her side.

"Sorry about all this. I heard Sarge brought a lovely girl with him, so I said I wanted to meet you."

"Oh, not at all. I am honored to be able to meet you, Your Royal Highness."

"Hee hee. You can call me Sophia, okay? You don't have to be so nervous. It's just a family dinner."

They may have just been Sophia's husband and brothers-in-law, but to Amelia, everyone here was royalty. While the meal must have been delicious, she was so nervous that she barely tasted any of it.

After dinner, they were served tea and dessert, and Julius announced that he had gone through with the procedures to break off his engagement. After he gave his reasoning for doing so, Alexis and Est both grew considerably upset.

"So Marquis Keadly's daughter was that kind of woman?" said Alexis with an angry expression.

Est nodded. "Based on her family background and their political standing, it made sense to make her a potential fiancée, but I suppose you haven't actually had many interactions. Still, a number of foreign powers have been getting restless. If you don't decide on a fiancée soon, we may have some problems."

"That's what father told me too. I thought I could decide after graduation, but it seems I should make a decision while I'm still in school."

"Um, excuse me?"

Amelia gave voice to the thought that it might be dangerous for an outsider like herself to hear the internal affairs of the royal family. Julius looked at her, then smiled.

"What's this? Are you nominating yourself to be my fiancée?"

"Of course not," she said in a fluster. Even if he was joking, he shouldn't say something so preposterous.

For some reason, Sarge looked displeased at their exchange, which seemed to amuse his older brothers. Amelia didn't have the mental energy to think about why that might be, since she had been thrown into the midst of the royal family alone.

They suggested she stay the night at the castle. The crown princess beckoned Amelia to her room, saying she wanted the two of

them to speak alone.

Sophia was being so kind to Amelia, whose expression was stiff with anxiety as she tried her hardest not to be rude.

"I'm sorry, you must have been quite nervous, right?"

Amelia just gave a vague laugh, not wanting to tell her she was still feeling on edge, since Sophia was being so nice and acknowledging her struggle.

The crown princess's room was incredibly spacious and lavishly decorated with flowers. Apparently, every morning, Alexis would bring her the flowers he picked from the garden. Their marriage had been political, but it seemed they had built a strong, reliable relationship.

Amelia almost couldn't stop herself from sighing as she thought about how different the two of them were from her and Reese.

"A lot has happened today. You must be tired, yes? Please, have some herbal tea. It'll perk you right up."

"Thank you."

Remembering everything that had happened since this morning, she realized it had indeed been a rough day. As she thought about that, she took a sip of the tea Sophia's lady-in-waiting brewed for them. The refreshing taste eased some of Amelia's anxiety.

"At any rate, I'm astonished at what Lady Keadly did. Not only what she did to you, but also what she did to her classmates, threatening them so they'd follow her orders."

And even though she had only been one of the candidates to become Julius's fiancée, she'd been behaving as if the decision had already been made.

Sophia couldn't hide her indignation as she said that. Amelia asked in a worried voice what would happen to the girls.

"Right. They can't go without punishment. I suppose they'll be suspended from school?"

"Is that so...?"

That would surely have a negative impact on their futures, but it was better than being expelled. For the nobles of the Kingdom of Bedeiht, it was only after graduating from the Royal Academy of Magic that they were regarded as adults.

While minors were allowed to use magic for the purpose of study after enrolling in the academy, only those who graduated were permitted to continue using magic. That was why, if someone were to be expelled from school, their powers would be sealed, and they would never be able to use magic again. The use of magic was specially reserved for the nobility. It would be difficult for those who could no longer use magic to continue living as nobles.

"In the times we're in, it will make things difficult for Julius to see

his pool of potential fiancées dwindle. Really, he wanted to create a list of candidates and then decide on a partner upon graduating. Will he really be made to decide on a fiancée so soon?”

“Is he in a rush?” asked Amelia without thinking. She figured the fiancée of a member of the royal family would have to be chosen with more careful deliberation.

In response to that, Sophia smiled sadly. “The princes of our kingdom have the precious light magic affinity. They’ve had to deal with a lot because of that.”

That was why the relationship between the brothers was so strong, explained Sophia.

Prince Alexis’s magic had always been exceptionally strong. When he was a child, he hadn’t been able to control it well and would sometimes unintentionally release it, so he had been sequestered in a separate villa. That was why he cherished his family and brothers so much.

“Having incredibly strong magic and not being able to control it is very dangerous. His magic was controlled by his emotions and would often go berserk, so he spent a lot of time alone, trying to feel nothing.”

Apparently his magic would go berserk not only when he was sad or angry but also when he was happy. Rather than destroying objects and hurting the people he loved, he preferred to spend his time alone.

The second eldest, Est, had a weak constitution and hadn’t been able to attend the academy. He had recovered enough that daily life was no longer difficult for him, but he was still unable to push himself too far.

As for the third son, Julius, foreign dignitaries had long been approaching him with offers of marriage. Since there were four brothers, surely at least one of them could marry into the family of a bride from a foreign country. For that reason, not only neighboring countries who were aiming for the light magic affinity but also the Beltz Empire, situated far across a precipitous mountain range, were sending proposals that bordered on threats.

The Beltz Empire was a great power that boasted exceptional military strength and vast tracts of land. If it weren’t for the mountains, which were perilous to cross, the entire continent would be under its control.

The reason every proposal of marriage was sent to Julius, and not to Sarge, was that Sarge was the son of the queen.

Julius had been planning to decide on his fiancée from a list of candidates compiled while he was enrolled in school, so in that time, quite a few names had been thrown into the nomination pool. And yet there was now a reason for him to decide on a fiancée quickly,

seemingly due to international affairs, the details of which were not explained to Amelia, of course.

“Even though she was one of his prospective fiancées, you cannot make that type of woman a wife of royalty no matter how urgent the situation. There are other candidates. Anyway, His Majesty the King has explicitly declared that he does not intend on having one of his sons be taken in by a family from another country,” said Sophia with a smile.

“What about Sarge?”

She was curious because Sophia had said each of the princes had had to deal with a lot, so that must have included Sarge as well.

In response to Amelia’s question, Sophia nodded. “Apparently, Sarge has always been fascinated with botany. There were many instances when he would notice an unusual plant and run off on his own for a closer look.”

Ten years ago, there had been an incident in which Sarge went missing during an outing. His brothers had searched for him desperately, making full use of their light magic, and had at last saved Sarge, who had been taken captive.

“There was a rumor saying the culprits were agents of the Beltz Empire who were after his light magic.”

The captured criminals had all committed suicide, so there was no way to know for sure. Despite that incident, Sarge still meandered around without any guards, naturally worrying his older brothers.

Sarge had said that anytime he met with Amelia, he would bring his guard with him. Which meant, if she met with him as often as possible, it would ease Julius and the others’ worries and also keep him safe from danger. Amelia reflected on that fact.

“I’m sorry. You must be so tired, and here I am prattling on. Please, get some rest.”

After their long talk, an attendant came to bring Amelia to a guest room.

Although Amelia was sure she was tired, she was unable to sleep in the opulent room with its soft bed, instead staring at the ceiling as various thoughts ran through her mind.

The next morning...

At Sophia’s invitation, the two of them headed towards the same dining room from yesterday to have breakfast. Sarge, however, was not there. He had apparently been poring over Amelia’s data from last night all the way until morning. She wanted to say hello to him, but she had to return early to her dorm to get ready for the day.

After returning to her dorm room in a carriage they had prepared for her, she thought briefly about what had happened in the classroom

after she'd left, and how Emilla had been completely stricken with despair.

She wondered how Emilla was doing now, and if the class atmosphere would also change from here on out.

Chapter 3: Changing Environment

Having quickly prepared her things for school, Amelia left her dorm room.

She had been so nervous she hadn't been able to sleep, so her body felt a bit heavy. But after she filled her lungs with the crisp morning air, her sleepiness faded and her mind grew clearer.

Perhaps it wasn't to the same extent as Sarge, but before Amelia had enrolled in the academy, there had been times when she would become so absorbed in her magic studies and writing up data that she would be up all night. A little bit of sleeplessness like this was no big deal for her.

She felt that she and Sarge were probably a bit alike.

Perhaps he thought so too, and that was why he had become so interested in her, a noble from the countryside, and kept her by his side.

Suddenly, she felt someone's gaze on her. She looked up to see that her neighbor was just about to leave her room as well.

Amelia was about to instinctively say a greeting but then held her tongue.

She remembered how they had become friends soon after entering school, only for the other girl to avoid her afterwards.

Erica...

Amelia had considered her a friend at the time, so it had been a shock. But considering she had just been betrayed by her longtime fiancé, she felt there was nothing to be done about a girl she had just met tossing her aside in an act of self-preservation.

Regardless, she wasn't planning on trying to become friends with Erica again.

Betrayals tended to repeat themselves. Even if they did become friends again, Erica would probably toss Amelia aside once again if something else were to happen. Amelia didn't think she wanted to be friends with someone like that.

Thinking that even saying hello would be troublesome, she averted her gaze and walked away.

"Ah..."

Erica seemed like she wanted to say something, but they had nothing to discuss. Amelia continued walking without sparing a backward glance.

When she entered her classroom, all her classmates simultaneously turned to look at her. She had arrived a little later than usual, so most of her classmates were already there. When she met their gazes, everyone looked away awkwardly.

Thinking that she probably would have been left in this kind of atmosphere yesterday, she was glad that Sarge had taken her with him.

Just as she had predicted, there was no sign of Emilla or the two other girls.

The two girls had probably been suspended, but what had happened to Emilla? Even though she was a daughter of high-ranking nobility, the situation had involved Julius and Sarge. She had probably been suspended as well.

However, from Emilla's point of view, it was probably a greater detriment to be dropped as Julius's fiancée—a position she felt she was uniquely suited for by virtue of her social standing—than to be suspended. Even after returning to school, she wouldn't be able to return to her previous behavior.

In fact, she would probably have a hard time finding another fiancé.

But this was her own doing, in the end.

It might have been harsh, but that was all she felt about Emilla. You reap what you sow, after all.

Amelia sat in her seat and quietly waited for class to begin. She could hear the befuddled conversations of her classmates around her. They seemed unsure about how they should treat Amelia.

For her part, Amelia did not even want to get along with them. She would be satisfied as long as they no longer directed their malice towards her.

The best thing would be for them not to interact with each other. "Amelia."

As she was thinking that, someone suddenly called out her name.

She raised her head towards the familiar voice to see Sarge standing at the entrance to her classroom.

"Sarge?" she said, hastily standing up.

She was relieved to see his knight escort, Kaid, standing diligently behind him. After hearing about what had happened to Sarge, she felt worried about him walking around alone even within the academy grounds, despite the fact that it had happened ten years ago.

"I'm sorry for not seeing you off this morning."

"O-Oh no, you didn't need to," she said, quickly shaking her head.

"I think my brothers and my sister-in-law have all taken a liking to you. They said they want you to come by anytime you please," said Sarge, smiling softly.

Amelia felt the stares of those around her.

With that exchange, it became known among her classmates that Amelia had not only gone to the royal castle but that she had met with the royal family, including His Highness the Prince, and had even stayed the night at the castle.

What should I do...?

She was a little embarrassed, but on second thought, she felt it wasn't that serious an issue.

Amelia didn't have any friends who would press her with questions about the situation, after all.

"Your Highness, class is about to begin," whispered Kaid, with a sympathetic gaze towards Amelia.

"Understood. That's right, I was curious about some things in the materials from yesterday. Is it all right if I come by later to discuss them?"

"Yes, of course." Amelia nodded, feeling a sense of responsibility to be at Sarge's side as much as possible. She was sure that would help Julius and the others feel reassured.

After Sarge left with his knight escort, the teacher entered the classroom and began the lesson. As Amelia looked at the blackboard, she was reminded of the projection from yesterday.

Julius's magic had perfectly reenacted the hostility directed at Amelia, and Emilla's derisive laughter.

Even though Emilla's misdeed had been exposed and she had been made to atone, Amelia's wounded heart wouldn't easily mend.

In an effort not to think unnecessary thoughts, she focused on the lesson.

Right after class ended...

Amelia was trying to decide whether or not to go to the dining hall when, again, someone called out to her.

"Amelia, do you have a moment?"

When she raised her gaze, she saw that this time it was Julius poking his head into her classroom. Of course, behind him were his two guards.

"Yes, I do."

As she endured her classmates' stares, Amelia rose from her seat.

Naturally, they must have been thinking that something had happened for two princes to be calling on her in the same day.

It was probably for the best that, despite their curiosity, there was no one among her classmates who would question her about it.

So thought Amelia as she walked behind Julius.

But then, she realized with a shock that the place he was taking her to was, without a doubt, the dining room reserved for the royal

family.

“Well then, go on in.”

“N-No. Um, this is...”

The spacious dining room was empty.

This was a heavily guarded area; access was so limited that it was difficult even for fiancées of the royal family to enter. Sarge and Julius may have called her their friend, but still, it must have been forbidden for her to enter.

“You seem a bit troubled, huh?” Julius took a deep breath when he saw Amelia’s frightened state. “Sarge usually spends his afternoon break holed up in the library and hardly ever comes to eat lunch. That’s not a huge problem in and of itself, but he also frequently skips breakfast, like he did today...”

“That’s not good...”

That fact naturally also worried Amelia. Being passionate about research was a good thing, but that sort of behavior would soon take a toll on his health.

“But if I can tell him you’re eating lunch here as well, he’s sure to come. After all, you yourself are the very field data Sarge is interested in.”

Being urged by Julius, and having him tell her His Majesty the King had also granted his approval, Amelia could no longer refuse.

Despite her bewilderment, she took a look around. The room was about the size of a classroom and contained a kitchen as well as personal chefs and maids to serve the food.

“I already told him you and I would go on ahead and wait for him in the dining room, so he should be here soon.”

It seemed Julius’s guards would also be dining in this room. Feeling reassured by that, she sat in a chair at his prompting. Then, just as Julius had said, Sarge soon appeared with Kaid.

“Amelia.”

When he saw Amelia, his face lit up in a smile. Seeing that made a heat rise slowly in her chest.

There was someone who needed someone like her.

That soothed Amelia’s heart, which had been hurt by Reese’s betrayal and her classmates’ horrible treatment. If they so desired of her, and she was allowed to be by his side as his friend, then she would support Sarge as best she could.

The food that was served was incredibly delicious. They completed their meal together in a relaxed fashion, and afterwards Julius and Kaid pleaded with Amelia to dine with them here from then on. She nodded without a second thought.

As Sarge’s knight escort, Kaid was unable to leave Sarge’s side—apparently, that meant he was also unable to eat lunch most days. For

a knight who often had to use his body, that must have been fairly difficult.

After agreeing to meet with Sarge at the end of the day to discuss his questions, Amelia returned to class.

Upon her return, her classmates stared at her and whispered among themselves. They probably meant to speak quietly so she couldn't hear them, but their low voices unexpectedly reached her ears.

Is Amelia going to be Julius's new fiancée? Or no, maybe she'll be Sarge's? He hasn't spoken of an engagement yet.

Hearing their conversations, she almost burst into laughter.

Amelia's fiancé was Reese.

Reese found his true love and wanted to break off their engagement, but Amelia rebuked him and refused to grant his wish. As that rumor circulated, Amelia had, without her even knowing it, become the wicked woman who stood in the way of true love. That was the Amelia her classmates hated and ostracized.

And now they had already forgotten about that rumor completely and were spreading yet another irresponsible rumor.

Ugh... I don't want to be here.

The afternoon class would soon begin, but Amelia fled the classroom.

She had taken refuge in the courtyard and was staring vacantly at the fountain when a voice called out to her from behind.

"Oh? What's going on? The afternoon class is about to begin, you know."

She looked behind her to see a familiar young lady with silver hair looking at her with a concerned expression.

"Oh, it's you from before... Did someone throw another important possession of yours into the fountain again?"

"Ah..."

She was the one who had dried Amelia's bag with wind magic after it had been thrown into the fountain. Since this girl was one of the few people who had treated Amelia kindly at this academy, she remembered her well: Countess Marie Edori.

"No, not this time. I just felt like I didn't want to be in class anymore, so I ended up leaving," she answered. Marie knew of her situation somewhat, so Amelia thought she wouldn't mind an honest answer.

"I see. In that case, you can talk to me about it. My afternoon class is an independent study."

"Oh, but..."

Amelia declined, not wanting to disrupt her studies, but Marie semi-forcibly took her along with her.

“The library is a bit crowded, so let’s use a private study room. Don’t worry, I can use soundproofing magic.”

Amelia had heard that one could use study rooms after becoming a second-year and starting independent study. This one was a small room containing only desks and chairs, but that very sparsity made it so one could concentrate on one’s studies.

Amelia briefly explained what had happened yesterday and also just recently.

“I heard about that—that two students from the first year A class were suspended. And that Lady Keadly has been expelled.”

“Wha... E-Expelled?”

Amelia was shocked at that unexpectedly harsh punishment; she had been sure Emilla would be suspended at most.

If one couldn’t graduate from the Royal Academy of Magic, one was no longer permitted to use magic. That was because being able to use magic was like proof of one’s nobility. Never mind a new marriage proposal—Emilla would either have to enter a convent or leave her family and become a commoner.

“You were unaware?”

“Yes. I thought all three would be suspended...”

Marie shook her head and said that things were not that simple.

“She forced two lower-ranking nobles to do as she asked, and she unreasonably tyrannized you based solely on a rumor. Add to that the fact that she got in the way of Prince Sarge’s research, and there was no saving her.”

Not to mention that His Majesty the King also had high expectations for Sarge’s research. There was nothing odd about ruining a marquis family for behavior that obstructed that research, explained Marie.

“Since you are aiding Sarge in his research, your worth will only continue to increase. I don’t think there’s any need for you to pay the slightest attention to the gossiping of your peers.”

“...Thank you.” Amelia smiled vaguely.

It was nice of Marie to say that, but all Amelia had really done was hand over some documents.

Noticing that her words didn’t seem to make Amelia feel any better, Marie proposed something else.

“Are you aware that the academy is about to establish a Special A class?”

“A Special A class?”

“That’s right. The independent study for students in my year also serves to allow us to study in preparation for qualifying for that class.”

In order to allow students with exceptional abilities to grow even more, a Special A class would be established starting from the second

semester. It was an attempt to create a fitting environment for those who had already acquired the fundamentals, one in which they would be able to concentrate their energies on their own research.

Compared with other countries, magical research in their kingdom was quite advanced, but since the academy was exclusive to nobility, they also had to put forth effort into socializing. The new class would be an environment in which talented individuals would be able to escape from socializing and focus on magical research.

“That sounds like something that was created for Sarge, right?”

“That’s right. But it will be an excellent environment in which one can study magic. I’m trying my hardest to get into that class. Won’t you try too?”

“Me?”

“It doesn’t matter what year you are. Though it will likely be difficult for a first-year student to be accepted. But I heard you received the top scores during the entrance examination. That was probably part of the reason Emilla was being so hostile towards you. I’m sure with your talent, you would be able to do it.”

Apparently, the exam to enter the Special A class would be held before the end of the first semester.

“Special A class...” Amelia muttered.

If she could make it into that class, she would no longer have to face her current classmates. And there was absolutely no way someone like Reese, who had dropped from the A class to the C class, would be able to pass the exam.

Anyhow, it would be a gathering of the magical elite. There wouldn’t be any absurd rumors floating around. And if she could learn advanced magic, that would surely be beneficial to her family’s domain.

And of course, Sarge would no doubt be placed in that class.

“I will also try to get in,” she said decisively.

Marie smiled delightedly. “I knew you would say so. Let’s do our best together. Although I hear that first-years, who don’t have a record of past achievements, will need a letter of recommendation. I could write one for you, but I think it’d be best for you to ask Prince Sarge. I’m sure that would be a big help for you.”

Amelia was unsure if it would be all right for her to ask him for something like that, but Marie just kept telling her to ask him anyway. Finally, Amelia acquiesced, saying she would ask when she met with him at the end of the day.

Marie went on to tell her what she would need to study for the examination.

“Thank you for everything,” said Amelia, bowing her head.

Marie looked away as if slightly embarrassed. “It’s not a problem.

I didn't have friends before, so I don't know when to stop sometimes. Sorry if I am being too pushy."

Amelia had thought that she would never make another friend, but perhaps she could trust Marie. With that thought in mind, she smiled softly for the first time since entering this academy.

Amelia and Marie remained in the study room and studied together until afternoon classes ended.

The level of the Special A class was unsurprisingly high. But in order to devote herself to the development of her family's domain, she had been putting her all into studying magic even before entering the academy. And although she couldn't use it, she had even studied some earth magic to be able to assist Reese.

If she tried her hardest now, then she might be able to manage it before the end of the semester.

Before long, the afternoon class ended, and the school day was over.

Amelia didn't return to her classroom; she decided to go straight to where Sarge would be—in the library, according to Marie.

Sarge and Marie were in the same year and the same A class. If she was doing independent study, then he would be too. And apparently he always did his independent studying in the library. Sarge had no real need to attend the classes at the academy in the first place. If anything, he probably made the teachers feel uncomfortable.

If Amelia could enroll in the Special A class, then she would be able to study with Sarge and Marie. It would surely make her academy life worthwhile.

She was walking along, reflecting on that possibility, when she saw people standing right in front of the entrance to the library, blocking her way.

Amelia's head was filled with thoughts of what Marie had told her to study and all the things she needed to do before the examination. That was why she didn't even spare a glance at those blocking the doorway. Thinking she could enter a different way, she turned on her heel.

"Please wait, Amelia."

But the person who'd been standing in her way chased after her. He had a familiar-sounding voice.

Huh? Reese?

She remembered that this was where she had run into him before too. The one standing next to him must have been the girlfriend mentioned in the rumors.

No thank you. I do not want to see you.

She wished he would have just ignored her. Why did he have to go and call out to her when he was with his girlfriend?

He was probably scheming something again.

She no longer wanted to be used by him. She didn't even want to look at his face.

Without stopping, Amelia tried to escape into the library through the other entrance.

"Stop, please!"

He grabbed her wrist, and her skin crawled with disgust. That was when she realized just how much she had come to hate Reese.

She wasn't going to blame him for finding someone he liked. One couldn't control the feelings of another, after all.

But they had been engaged for ten long years. She wished he could have at least been honest with her. If he had just told her his reason, she would have accepted it. She would have wanted him to be happy.

Yet, despite that...

What Reese had done was ruin Amelia's reputation and turn her into the villain before she had even entered school. If she hadn't met Sarge, Julius, and Marie, she would have been living in total despair. He had done such terrible things to her, and yet here he was nonchalantly appearing with his girlfriend and calling Amelia's name. What a selfish, cruel person.

"Please let go of my hand," she said in a cold voice that surprised even her.

They had spent a long time together. Had the bonds they had built really crumbled so easily?

If he wanted her to play the villain, then so be it.

It no longer mattered to her what he or anyone else thought of her. She was just going to endeavor to study for the sake of her family domain.

"Amelia, I'm sorry. I..." he said in a conceited voice, gripping her hand even tighter.

She wanted to slap him as hard as she could.

"...Tch."

But as she thought that, Reese suddenly recoiled and let go of her hand.

"Amelia."

Someone called her name, and she turned to see two figures appear on her left and right, stepping forward to separate Reese and Amelia.

"Sarge, Julius..." she said their names without thinking, shocked.

On her right stood Sarge, looking stern.

On her left stood Julius, looking disgusted.

Since they were in front of Reese, who was still technically Amelia's fiancé, they took care not to touch her. Even so, seeing them

protect her like that almost brought tears to her eyes.

Seeing the sudden appearance of the two princes made Reese and his girlfriend's eyes go wide with surprise. They came to their senses and hurriedly bowed.



“Amelia, I went to meet you at your classroom but was surprised to see you weren’t there. I have something I want to ask you about at once regarding the data from yesterday,” said Sarge, as if he’d already forgotten about Reese.

“Oh, yes. I’ll do my best to be of some help...”

Julius stood in front of Sarge and Amelia, blocking them, as if to say “Don’t worry about it, just go.” Amelia gave a slight bow and followed after Sarge.

Then she heard Julius speak from behind them. “Your fiancée, Countess Amelia Lenia, is helping Sarge with his research. My brother’s research is very important to this kingdom. Amelia will be prioritizing helping him over anything else.”

He was asserting Amelia’s worth and warning them not to approach her carelessly.

“U-Understood,” answered Reese in a trembling voice. Then he hurriedly took his leave.

“They must have heard about what happened to Emilla Keadly and decided to try something.” said Julius with disdain after returning to where Sarge and Amelia were.

Emilla had been strictly punished for spreading a groundless rumor and for her unjust treatment of Amelia. With that fact circulating around the academy, there were finally those who were beginning to question the credibility of Reese’s rumors. Reese had probably panicked and, in order to lend his account greater credibility, had approached Amelia in an attempt to make her hurl abuse at him in public.

“I was just about to slap him.”

Even though she didn’t care how people perceived her anymore, it would indeed have been bad to act just how Reese wanted her to.

“Sarge, Julius. Thank you so much for saving me,” she said.

Julius laughed, saying that it was natural for friends to help each other. Sarge, however, remained silent, his face frozen in that stern expression.

“...Sarge?”

It was unusual for him to make that kind of face in front of Amelia.

When she said his name, he looked in the direction where Reese had been, and asked, “Amelia, do you still wish to be engaged to him?”

“No, I really don’t. But my father strongly wishes to bring an earth magic user into the family. I doubt he’ll readily let me break off the engagement.”

Her father had a strong desire for an earth magic revival. Plus,

this engagement already involved a hefty sum of money.

Although Reese's betrayal was the cause, the issue probably wouldn't be resolved easily. Her father loved her, but when it came to earth magic, he became stubborn and didn't consider anyone else's opinion. Naturally, to the lord of a domain with as much farmland as theirs, an earth magic user was extremely valuable.

That thought made her feel depressed.

"I see." At Amelia's reply, a captivatingly beautiful smile appeared on Sarge's face.

"Sarge, what are you planning?" Julius asked worriedly.

Sarge replied that he wasn't going to do anything. "I was just thinking, they'll be going down with their own crime. That's all," he said, spreading the materials out. "Amelia, why is this the only area with a high crop yield?"

Amelia looked at where Sarge was pointing, then answered, "Hmm, that's where Reese used earth magic. I believe he used growth promotion magic."

"Growth promotion magic, huh? But in this case, improving the soil would have been more effective. Then what about this area?"

"This area had particularly bad insect damage. I don't think the environment was much different from other areas, but for some reason it was worse here."

"There must be some reason for it... The temperature and soil were the same. Besides that..."

Looking at Sarge's serious-looking face in profile, all the anger and sadness she had felt towards Reese just a moment ago completely dissipated.

Amelia enjoyed putting her all into something, just as Sarge was doing now. She thought about how happy she was to be able to help him in this way, without worrying about unnecessary obligations and relationships.

Amelia provided any data Sarge requested and explained anything that was not included in the documents.

"Pardon me..."

Suddenly, someone spoke, bringing the two of them back to reality. Kaid was looking at them with a troubled expression.

"It is nearing closing time," he said, prompting Amelia to look around and see that at some point, the library had become empty of students.

Julius was also gone.

According to Kaid, Julius had told the two of them he was leaving. Sarge and Amelia had both responded to him, but since they'd been concentrating so hard, they did not remember.

Kaid muttered something about how he'd thought Amelia was his

ally, but it turned out she was “one of them.”

What does he mean by “one of them”?

She wanted to deny what he said, but if she hadn't been focusing intently, she would not have been able to keep up with Sarge. That was why she really did not remember responding to Julius.

She worried a bit that she might have done something rude.

But Sarge's thought process was so profound, the words he said were only the tip of the iceberg, so she had to anticipate his intuitive leaps and pick out data points that were applicable.

But Amelia did not dislike that kind of tension either.

Rather, if Kaid meant that she was just like Sarge, then that made her happy. She couldn't deny his words.

Thinking about that, she tidied up the materials and left the library.

“Sorry for keeping you so late. Let me escort you back to your dorm.”

Even if she had declined, he would still have escorted her back. Having learned that already, she expressed her sincere gratitude. “Thank you.”

“I'm sorry—before that, could we stop by my classroom? I left all of my things behind.”

She had fled her classroom during the lunch break, so she needed to go back there first.

“Speaking of which, I came to your classroom right after class ended, but you weren't there. Did something happen?”

“No, actually, I was with Marie this afternoon. She told me about the Special A class, and when I expressed interest in it, she guided me through what I needed to study,” she said, feeling that she didn't have to tell him the part about not wanting to be around her classmates.

“Special A class?”

She'd thought it was a special measure for his sake, but it seemed he hadn't been interested in it and had missed hearing about it.

“Yes, apparently first-year students can also take the entrance exam. I would just need to get a recommendation from someone.”

“A recommendation, hmm?”

Marie had suggested that Amelia take the plunge and ask Sarge for a recommendation.

Thinking that, she opened her mouth...

But then—

“If that's the case, how about asking my father? He also said he wanted to meet you, so it would be the perfect opportunity.”

“...What?” she couldn't help but ask plainly at his unexpected response.

Uh, Sarge is the kingdom's fourth prince, so his father would be...His

Majesty the King...right?

She had to think about it again just to be sure.

But bringing a recommendation letter from the king to take an examination at the Royal Academy of Magic seemed like the wrong thing to do. She would probably pass without even having to take the test. That would be meaningless.

“Um, Sarge...”

“Should we go now? You’re fine to go as you are, right?”

“No, I...”

She felt she had to decline somehow, but she was so confused that no words came out.

She looked at Kaid, pleading for his help.

Kaid, who ordinarily never did more than offer Amelia a sympathetic glance, understood her pleading look and came to her rescue. “Your Highness, would it not be best to inquire first about the details of this Special A class? I believe Prince Julius would be knowledgeable about it.”

“I see. My brother said he went home already, right?”

“...Yes. To the royal castle.”

Kaid’s face said “I screwed up,” but there was nothing to be done now. It seemed unavoidable that Amelia would be going to the royal castle two days in a row.

Amelia boarded the royal carriage with Sarge, and they headed off to the castle. Not even Amelia’s father had visited the castle as frequently as she was visiting now.

I’m just the daughter of a country noble. How did things turn out like this? She couldn’t help but lament her fate. But Amelia also wanted to hear more details about the Special A class. She resolved to seize this as a good opportunity to ask a lot of questions.

Once they arrived at the castle, she and Sarge parted ways, and she was led to the same guest room she had stayed in yesterday. While she waited for Sarge and Julius, an attendant brewed her some herbal tea. This was her second time at the castle, so she was a bit more at ease than she had been the day before. As she was relaxing, Julius was the first to arrive in the reception room, perhaps having heard the reason for their visit from Sarge.

“Julius, thank you so very much for helping me earlier,” she said.

“Think nothing of it. You’re a dear friend, so it was only natural,” he responded, smiling as he sat down across from Amelia. “It’s just... Sarge was bothered by this as well, but for someone who was with the girlfriend he loves so much that he wants to break off his current engagement, Reese seemed to only have eyes for you. That was just a bit curious.”

Now that he mentioned it, Amelia had assumed the girl with

Reese was his girlfriend, but she hadn't said a single word as far as Amelia remembered.

What could that mean?

It seemed suspicious, but there was no way she could know what Reese was thinking now.

"More importantly, it seems Sarge kept you late. Sorry about that."

"Not at all. I myself was too focused even to notice that you had left. My apologies."

In response to her apology, Julius muttered something similar to what Kaid had. "...I see. You're just like Sarge, aren't you?"

Unsure of how to respond, she just smiled vaguely. Julius cleared his throat to regain his composure. "You wanted to know more about the Special A class, right?"

"Yes. Marie was so kind as to tell me about it, and I thought I would like to aim for it myself."

"Marie? Ah, Countess Edori?" Julius nodded, then gave a detailed explanation.

"The Special A class is a class only for those with exceptional talent within the Royal Academy of Magic. Also, after you graduate from the academy, you can become a researcher at the Royal Magic Research Institute, which will be established at the same time as the Special A class. They are planning to have several researchers start working there once it's established as well."

Apparently His Majesty the King was going to found a full-scale magical research institution. It seemed he was also planning to establish a research facility on the academy grounds.

"I just thought it was a class that specialized in magical research. I think what you're describing would be too much for me."

"Not at all. I was planning on recommending you from the beginning. As I'm sure you've surmised already, the Special A class was intended for Sarge. It would be great if you could join the class too and become Sarge's assistant, even if it's just while you're in school."

Amelia didn't know how to react; Julius was speaking as if she had already been accepted into the class.

"That would be an honor, but first I must pass the examination..." she said.

Julius looked surprised.

"You haven't realized? You two usually talk about the Lenia domain, but you occasionally discuss magic theory as well, right?"

"...Yes."

It was true that they often discussed whether there were more efficient earth and water magic spells. Amelia's specialty was water

magic, but she had read quite a bit about earth magic in the hopes of being able to assist Reese. Since earth magic wasn't her affinity, she couldn't use it, but she had a lot of knowledge about it.

"The fact that you can keep up with Sarge means you possess considerably advanced knowledge as well. You should have more confidence in yourself."

According to Julius, Sarge had had some assistants in the past. However, no one had been able to follow his thinking, so Sarge had given up trying to explain things and ended up working alone. With no one by his side, he would become completely absorbed in his research, making his older brothers worry about their youngest brother overdoing it.

"It's not that our words haven't reached him, I don't think. He is just prioritizing the things he needs to do. The cold weather damage to the crops is a serious issue, and there are high expectations for Sarge's research."

Since his research was showing results, no one had been able to stop him from overexerting himself.

That was when Amelia had appeared.

She had brought with her the field data he needed, and she was knowledgeable enough to discuss magic theory with him. Sarge actually heeded her words, and he didn't want to lose the person whom he could finally talk to on equal footing.

"I'm sorry for imposing on you the responsibilities we were unable to fulfill. But I think at this point, you have become indispensable to Sarge. Please help our younger brother. That is our request as a family."

Julius bowed his head, and Amelia stood up, flustered.

"Julius, there is no need for that, not for me..."

Sarge's family was royalty. There was no need for him to bow his head and request something; he could have just issued it as an order.

But rather than doing that, he had expressed it as a request from his family, displaying their love for Sarge. The brothers really were close. In any case, having a prince bow his head to her had made her lose her composure, and she wrung her hands, at a loss for what to do.

"If I can be of any possible help, I will do my absolute best. So, I beg of you..." she pleaded fretfully, and finally Julius raised his head.

"Thank you. Sarge also likes you very much. Please take good care of him."

"That couldn't possibly..."

...Indeed, that couldn't possibly have been true.

Sarge probably liked her as a good friend. But nothing more than that.

In response to Amelia's denial, Julius said, "Sarge has only ever

been interested in magic and botany. With his good looks, he's always been popular with girls. But Sarge has never taken a partner and only ever offers the girls a gentle smile."

At some point, the girls had all realized that no one would ever be special to Sarge.

"But when he saw Reese take your arm, Sarge's anger was clear on his face. He moved to protect you, and he wanted to make the fiancé who hurt you atone."

At Julius's words, Amelia remembered how Sarge had moved in front of her to protect her from Reese.

When her heart had been almost entirely filled with anger and sadness towards Reese, seeing Sarge's protective stance had made her so relieved she had wanted to cry.

Thinking about it, Sarge had saved her many times over.

When she had been hesitating in front of the party venue, lacking the courage to enter alone. When those upperclassmen had almost spilled scalding-hot tea on her, Sarge, who should have been protected above all others, had risked his own safety to protect her.

I...

As she was trying to figure out her own feelings, Sarge finally arrived in the room.

"I'm sorry I'm late."

At his arrival, Julius switched topics and spoke of what he'd explained to Amelia about the Special A class.

"So, can I take the exam?" asked Sarge.

"No, there's no need for you to take it. You'll have to take it, Amelia, but I'm sure you'll pass without a problem."

Having been told that, she had to pass at all costs.

"Yes, I will do my best. However, what should I do about the recommendation letter?" she asked.

Julius nodded. "Right. I'll prepare that for you."

"Thank you. As long as it is not too great an inconvenience."

Amelia hastily bowed her head. She had been thinking that the way things were going, it might have been the king who was about to write her recommendation letter.

"Understood. I'll have it for you by tomorrow."

"Thank you very much."

She intended to leave after that, but just like the previous night, she was invited to dine with the family. Once again she met with Alexis, Sophia, and Est. It seemed to be their custom to enjoy a leisurely cup of tea and discussion after a cordial meal together.

Amelia spoke with Princess Sophia about many different things. She had thought they wouldn't have anything in common to talk about, but Sophia was a great conversationalist, so they were able to

pass the time pleasantly. While they conversed, a message was sent to Amelia's dormitory, and it was decided that she would spend the night at the royal castle once again.

"Would you like to go see the castle's library? I've been told there are quite a few rare books there," suggested Sophia, who thought it was still early to go to bed.

Amelia had always loved reading, so hearing that there were rare books made her eyes sparkle.

"Would it really be all right for me to do so?"

"Yes, of course! I'll have someone show you the way."

One of Sophia's attendants led her to the library. As expected of the royal castle's library, its collection of books was unmatched; the academy's library couldn't compare. There were large bookshelves, decorated with beautiful carvings, reaching all the way to the ceiling, and they were crammed full of books.

The caretaker in the library was a female civil service official. Sophia's attendant told her that Amelia was the crown princess's guest who was going to stay the night in the castle and that she would be using the library in her spare time. The caretaker nodded at the attendant's words and ushered Amelia into the library.

"As a friend of Her Royal Highness, you may read any book you wish, but Prince Sarge is also here, so..."

She probably wanted to convey to Amelia that she shouldn't disturb him or make too much noise. But before the caretaker could finish, they heard Sarge call out Amelia's name. He seemed to have seen her and come running, holding a thick book in his hand.

"Amelia, what are you doing here?"

Amelia told him that Sophia had suggested she come here, and Sarge nodded in understanding.

"You came at just the right time. I have something I want to talk to you about. Is now a good time?"

"Yes, of course."

She gave a slight bow to the shocked caretaker, then followed Sarge deeper into the library. In the innermost part of the library, surrounded by several tall bookshelves, were a large table and chairs. Based on the books piled on top of the table, she guessed that this was where Sarge spent most of his time.

They were in the castle, so Kaid was absent from Sarge's side. However, since the two of them were not completely alone—the caretaker was also present—this shouldn't have been a problem.

Amelia sat down at Sarge's urging and looked at him. He was gazing at Amelia with gentle eyes.

"After hearing that my brother is going to recommend you for the Special A class, I've been worrying that he might have asked you to do

something unreasonable.”

“Something unreasonable?” Amelia echoed his words with surprise. Sarge nodded.

“You have been a great help to me. Not just the data from your domain but also the fact that we can discuss magic together. I’ve never had someone I could do that with, so I’ve dragged you into this without even considering your own convenience,” said Sarge apologetically.

“That’s not...”

Amelia shook her head, saying there was no need for him to apologize. After all, just how many times had Sarge himself helped Amelia?

“But I’m sure it must be tiring to be with me. I don’t mean to force you into anything,” he said matter-of-factly, in a quiet voice.

Sarge was constantly giving various fields broad and deep consideration; his assistants would grow tired because it was incredibly difficult to keep up with him.

“Julius did not order me to do anything. He merely bowed and asked me to look after his younger brother.”

Julius, a member of the royal family, had bowed his head to her, the daughter of a country noble. By that gesture alone, she understood just how much he cherished his younger brother.

“He did...? But still, that doesn’t change the fact that you aren’t in a position to refuse.”

Each time he changed assistants, he got it into his head that it was his fault they had gotten worn out. That must have been why he had started doing things on his own.

Thus, he was concerned that maybe Amelia really was being forced into things.

“If my father recommends you, then you can study whatever you want. So that’s why I’m giving you this.”

Sarge handed over a recommendation letter from the king. He must have gone to get the letter while Julius was explaining the Special A class to Amelia. That was why he had been late.

Sarge hadn’t just saved Amelia several times, he was also an exceptionally kind person. She did not want him to misunderstand and think she was helping him because she’d been forced to do so.

“Actually, Sarge, I have long enjoyed recording data.”

That was why she decided to speak her feelings frankly.

“I’ve been writing down the data from our farmlands for many years, but it’s never been put to use and just piles up in a warehouse. That’s why I’m so happy it can be of help to you.”

Sarge looked at Amelia with a bewildered expression, as if she had said something he hadn’t anticipated. Hoping that he knew she meant

what she said, she smiled softly. Seemingly startled by her smile, Sarge averted his eyes slightly. A light blush rose on his fair cheeks at her unexpected words.

“Also, it’s fun to talk about magic theory together. I still have a lot to learn, but that’s also why I want to get into the Special A class. I hope I’ll be able to learn even more there.”

Amelia wanted to learn things in the Special A class that would allow her to help Sarge even more than she was now. She told him that was why she didn’t mind if her recommendation came from Julius instead of the king.

“...I see.” Sarge nodded slowly, as if ruminating over her words. His complex expression also seemed to show some concern for Amelia.

“I feel terribly sorry for not accepting a recommendation letter from the king after he took the pains to write one.”

“Don’t fret over it. As long as you’re okay with it, that’s all that matters. I’m sorry for taking up your time. If you’re interested in magic theory books, there are some over there. You can take your time in reading them.”

“I see. Thank you very much.”

Thinking Sarge must also have some research to do, Amelia left and headed towards the bookshelf he’d directed her to.

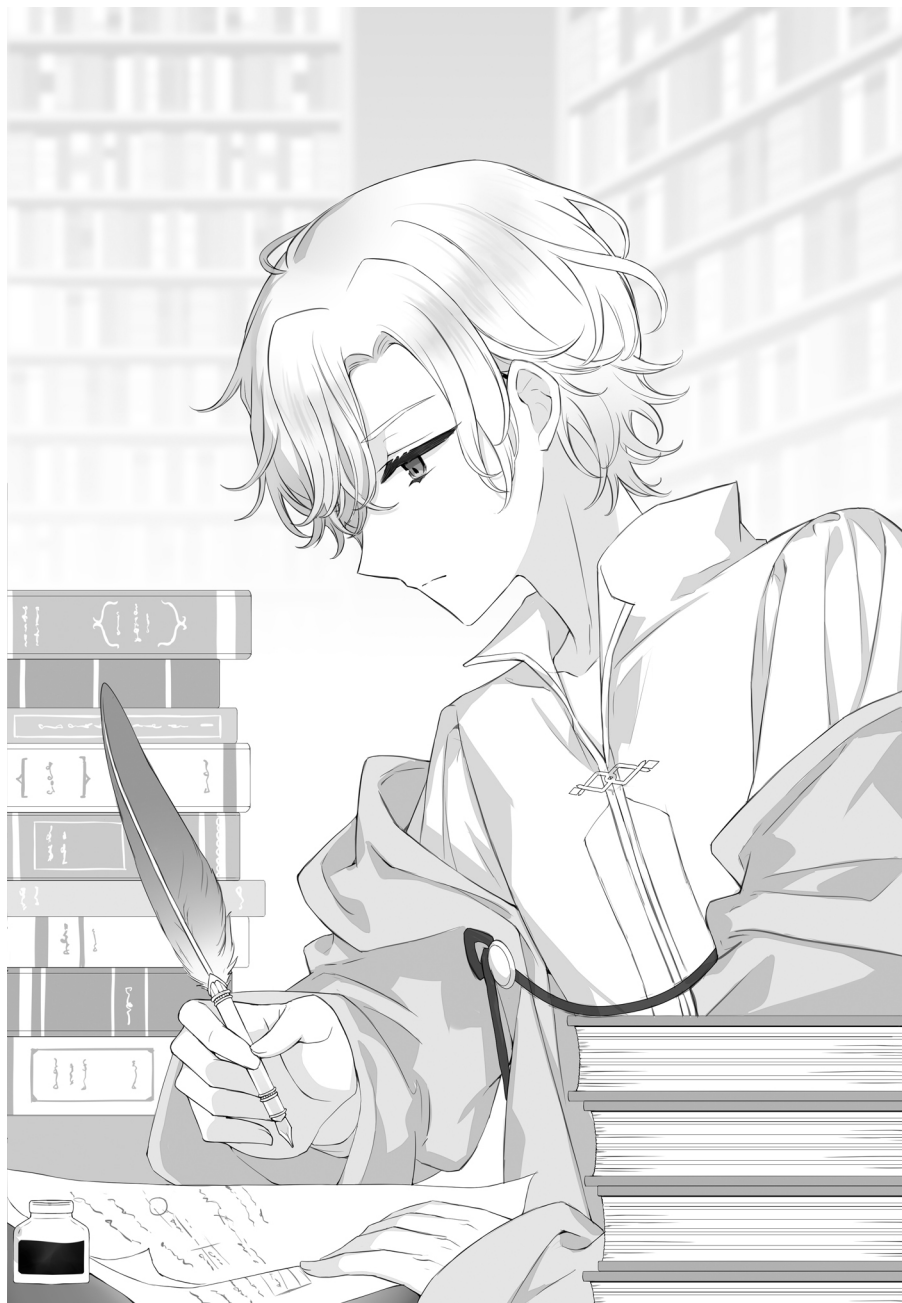
Wow, there are so many!

There were numerous valuable and antique books that were no longer in print. Amelia gathered several in her arms, sat in a chair, and immersed herself in reading them. There were also books that were too difficult for her to understand, but thinking she might glean something from scanning them, she took the time to read through those as well.

After reading however many books, Amelia suddenly came back to her senses. She looked out the window to see a dim light brightening the sky.

Huh? Did I really read all night?

Flustered, she looked towards Sarge to see that he was still in the same spot, fervently writing something down.



She looked around inside the library and realized that at some point the caretakers had rotated shifts; there was now a young man on duty. Sarge probably spent all night in the library routinely, so the caretakers knew to take care not to disturb him.

Although she wasn't one to talk, she knew that if he continued in this way, his health would suffer for it.

Plus, it was still early in the morning. Thinking that it would be good to get at least some rest, Amelia walked over to Sarge.

"Um, Sarge?"

"...Amelia? What's the matter?"

He asked her if there was something she didn't understand, and she responded, a bit awkwardly, "No, not that. It seems it's already morning."

"Oh, already?"

It seemed he had also been so engrossed in what he was doing that he had not noticed.

"I'll bring you to your room."

"Should you not get some rest as well?"

At that suggestion, Sarge shook his head. "No, I still have some things I want to do."

"In that case, I still have some books I want to read..."

They looked at each other for a moment, then reached the conclusion that they should return to their rooms before the attendant did.

"I'll just find a good stopping point."

"And I'll just finish reading this book."

The two of them returned to their work and, unsurprisingly, time passed without them noticing. They were discovered by the attendant, who had come looking for them and who then reported them to Julius and Sophia.

"I know I was the one who suggested you go to the library, but I can't believe you really spent the whole night reading books."

Amelia bowed her head in apology to the shocked Sophia.

"All the books were just so unique, I couldn't help but get absorbed in them."

Next to them, Julius was scolding Sarge.

"You were in the library all last night too. We can't overlook you doing this two nights in a row. No one will be happy if your health suffers from this, no matter how fruitful your research may be."

Julius and Sophia sighed simultaneously.

"In any case, you should at least get a little rest now. I'll turn in your letter of recommendation. Those who are going to take the Special A class exam can do independent study until the exam, so

come to the academy in the afternoon.”

Julius murmured something about feeling like his worries had become twofold, contrary to his expectations.

Abashed at his words, Amelia allowed herself to be led away by the attendant.

Amelia was allowed to rest in the guest room until midday, and then she and Sarge ate brunch together. In the afternoon, she accompanied him to the academy via carriage. She felt a bit refreshed now that she'd been able to sleep for a little while, but Sarge looked tired. It seemed that in his case, an incomplete rest instead worsened his condition.

“You seem energetic, Amelia...”

“Yes. I always used to run around the farms, so I'm actually a great deal stronger than I look.”

She told him that was why he should feel free to entrust any responsibility to her. Kaid, who was riding with them, fixed her with a complicated look. It was the same look Julius had given her earlier, as if he was thinking his worries had multiplied.

Amelia had been concerned about Sarge looking so unwell, but he had said he would go to the academy with her, so that's what they had decided to do. Julius would be there when they arrived. They could leave things up to him.

After they arrived, she and Sarge parted company. Instead of going to her classroom, she headed straight for the staff room. Just as Julius had told her earlier, the teachers there confirmed that she did not have to participate in classes and that she could freely use the private study rooms. Apparently, Amelia was the only first-year student taking the exam. They all encouraged her to do her best.

After she left, she headed for a private study room, then concentrated on her studies until the end of afternoon class time.

As she worked on the problems Marie had told her to study in preparation for the exam, she was surprised to find that they were easier than she had expected. Apparently the material she had studied under her home tutor and through self-study was even more advanced than she had thought.

But despite that, she was still nowhere near Sarge's level.

Amelia's ultimate goal was not to pass the Special A class exam but to catch up to Sarge. To do that, she needed to gain even deeper and more extensive knowledge.

Since it seemed that the afternoon classes had ended, she decided to head for the library to borrow some more specialized books rather than study aids. When she left the study room, someone simultaneously came out of the room next door. She didn't recognize their face, but they seemed to be an upperclassman; they gave her a

slight bow, so she gave one in return.

That was probably the first time she had given an ordinary greeting to a fellow student since entering the academy.

Could she go back to having a normal life? She allowed herself a little bit of hope.

But then she sensed an unfriendly gaze from behind her and stopped in her tracks. She had a feeling that if she turned around, she would be met with trouble.

She thought about leaving just like that, but then a voice called out to her.

“Excuse me...”

Having been stopped by that voice, Amelia slowly turned around. The one who had called out to her was a sweet-looking, beautiful girl with a desperate look on her face and her hands clasped tightly together.

She had glossy shoulder-length brown hair and green eyes.

She seemed familiar.

It was the young lady who had been accompanying Reese when Amelia had run into them: Sarah.

Class had only just ended, so there were many students surrounding them. Amelia hadn't thought Sarah would have tried talking to her amidst all these people.

“Yes? May I help you?” she responded, perplexed.

Sarah cried out boldly, “Please, just let go of Reese!”

The first words out of her mouth were direct and to the point.

“Let him go?” Amelia tilted her head in confusion.

“I understand why you wouldn't want to forgive us. We will atone however you want us to. So please, just stop tormenting Reese...”

Her eyes were full of anguish and her voice full of courage.



It was possible she was not Reese's accomplice, but rather, like everyone else, she had just believed Reese's lies.

Even Amelia considered that a possibility.

But Sarah had appeared before Amelia with Reese twice now. There was no way she was completely ignorant. Perhaps, given the situation with Emilla, they had learned that the two of them were in a disadvantageous position now that Sarge and Julius were Amelia's allies.

"And who might you be?"

Amelia had only heard who she was through others; she had never heard it directly from Sarah. When Amelia asked her that, Sarah looked like she was about to cry.

"I'm Sarah. How could you even ask that when you know all about Reese and me?"

She made it sound like Amelia was bullying her.

Before Sarah began to cry, Amelia said, "...I'm sorry. I really didn't know."

Sarah refused to accept Amelia's apology.

"I don't believe that for a second. Reese said he apologized to you in a letter. He explained his relationship with me and that he would continue apologizing until you forgave him."

Amelia raised her voice, thinking that she would be back at square one if she didn't refute Sarah here.

"All I heard were the rumors floating around school. I never heard anything from Reese himself."

"That's a lie. Why did you run away from Reese, then? You wouldn't even talk to him. He was so upset!"

"The one running away is Reese." She'd meant to keep her calm, but her voice was trembling.

All the events that had transpired since she'd arrived at the academy flooded into her memory one by one, and her tears threatened to spill over.

"I sent him countless letters. I told him I wanted to meet and talk properly. But Reese did his best to avoid me. If he really doesn't want to be engaged anymore, then he should just formally end our engagement. I would much rather be done with it."

But their engagement was a decision their families had made. They couldn't end things just because Reese no longer wanted to be with Amelia and had found someone else.

"Amelia." As if on cue, Reese rushed over to them, then stood in front of Sarah, shielding her. "Just stop it already. It's my fault for not being able to love you. Sarah has done nothing wrong."

"I'm sorry, Reese... This is all my fault..."

Reese and Sarah cuddled close together right in front of Amelia.

It seemed the surrounding students hadn't heard Sarah and Amelia's conversation until that point, so the way he was acting and speaking now made it seem like Amelia had been attacking Sarah.

The two of them had probably arranged all of this from the very start.

"What are you saying? I have no need for your love, Reese."

At this rate things would go exactly as he wanted them to, so Amelia urgently refuted his words.

"But you need earth magic, don't you? That's why your family paid such a large sum of money to buy me from my family."

"Tying Reese down with money? How awful!" Still clinging to Reese, Sarah shot Amelia a reproachful look.

It was well known that the Counts of Lenia had been exceptional earth magic users until two generations ago, when that magic had been lost due to the family patriarch's marriage.

Someone whispered that Amelia's family was using their wealth to tear apart these two lovers, which sparked a commotion around them.

Did she intend for this to happen from the moment she called out to me?

Unable to respond, Amelia bit her lip.

It was true her father was uncompromising when it came to earth magic.

And it was also true that her father had paid a large sum to the Thurma family to secure their engagement.

But that was typical in noble society. Rather, it was Reese's family that had used their engagement as a pretext to request funding.

But despite that, he was twisting the story to suit his ends.

With Amelia unable to form a response, Sarah smiled triumphantly.

But at that moment—

"...What will you do? At this rate, the rumors will go to waste."

She raised her head automatically at the sound of Sarah's voice. But Sarah, who was standing in front of her, was also looking around in evident confusion.

A little farther away, there was another Sarah. She was sitting in the lap of another Reese, snuggling up to his chest coquettishly.

Seeing them like that, the people around them raised voices of shock.

This is...

Amelia thought it might have been Julius's reenactment magic. But this wasn't just a simple projection; it was so vivid that it really seemed as though there were another Sarah right there.

"And we did so well spreading that rumor and isolating her before she

even entered school. So why are those two taking her side?"

There was no sign of that sweet-looking girl in the Sarah who said that so hatefully.

"You know, we don't need to have an official wedding for us to live together, Reese. I can be your true wife, and we can just make that girl deal with the domain. Count Lenia seems pretty rich."

Looking at the image of herself laughing, the real Sarah turned pale.

"N-No way. I never said anything like that..."

While the other Sarah kissed him, the other Reese said, *"That's right. The Lenias would do anything to get earth magic, so we can keep doubling down with Amelia and make her beg for it."*

Dumbfounded, Amelia watched as the other Reese wrapped Sarah in his arms.

She had been thinking that the reason he had changed was that he had met Sarah.

She had been thinking Sarah was the one who had lit the fire under Reese to spread that horrid rumor and falsely accuse her of those things.

But now Reese was looking at Amelia with a twisted expression she'd never seen him wear, speaking about how he was going to continue tormenting her.

Was Reese unhappy with our engagement this whole time?

They had been engaged for many years, but Reese had never expressed any displeasure, so she'd just assumed he had accepted it as well.

The two apparitions in front of Amelia began to speak once again.

"You talk to her first, Sarah. I'll come in later after seeing how things go."

"Understood. We should try to get a lot of witnesses. Hee hee! I can't wait to see the look on that girl's face."

As soon as they formulated their plan to do what had just transpired, they abruptly vanished.

"What nonsense! This is all your doing, isn't it?!"

Sarah raised her voice at Amelia, and all remaining traces of her sweet demeanor disappeared.

"It's not me. I can't do something like that," responded Amelia quickly.

She knew this was the work of light magic. And that no one outside of the royal family could use that kind of magic.

However, she thought it seemed different from Julius's magic.

"You liar. You're trying to frame us for something we didn't do and drive us out of school, aren't you? What a dirty trick."

Sarah refused to listen to Amelia's assertion that she had nothing

to do with what had just happened, drawing even closer to her. Then, suddenly, she disappeared from view.

Huh?

Amelia looked around in shock for the girl who had disappeared so abruptly and saw Kaid, Sarge's red-headed knight escort, pulling Sarah away from her.

A calm voice rang out in the area. "You are the ones trying to frame Amelia."

Since his knight escort was here, of course he would be here as well.

Noticing him, the crowd of people who had been looking on with interest hastily bowed their heads.

Of course, that included Reese and Sarah. Any disrespect towards *him* would not be tolerated.

Sarge walked straight to Amelia's side with slow, measured steps.

"Those images from earlier weren't fabricated using magic.

Rather, they were simply images of past events projected just as they had happened. That was an actual conversation that took place in this academy."

"That can't be..."

Not only Sarah but Reese trembled at those words.

They seemed to want to give some sort of excuse, but they couldn't contradict Sarge's magic. All they could do was cast their pale faces downward.

"Do you need more proof?" Sarge asked the silent pair.

Before they could open their mouths, he projected their figures once again.

"The new student welcome party is going to be held soon. What will you do, Reese?"

"Well, I of course won't be sending her a dress. And she should be notorious by now, so she probably won't be able to make any friends. She'll probably attend the party all by her lonesome."

"Oh, Reese, you're so terrible!" Sarah giggled. Reese pulled her in close.

"You're the only one I love. I wish I could go to the party with you, but it would cause problems if Amelia were to see us."

So Reese had deliberately neglected to contact Amelia or send her a dress after all. Someone had told her a marquis's son wouldn't forget to do something like that, and it was true.

"But if you make her so upset that she causes a commotion, won't she get expelled from school?"

If Amelia was expelled from school like Emilla had been, she would no longer have been able to use magic.

"Well, if I still marry her despite her expulsion and inherit the title of

count from her family, they can't complain if I bring you along too."

"That's right. As long as we're together, I'll want for nothing else."

The two even went on to look at the letters Amelia had sent to Reese and laugh.

Unable to bear watching any longer, Amelia looked away.

"I'm sorry, Amelia. I didn't want to hurt you."

The person apologizing to her was, of course, not Reese, but the one who had used the magic: Sarge.

"No, it is not your fault. Rather, I'm glad to know how he truly feels."

She shook her head, as if shaking off the past, then smiled at him.

While the same might not have been true for Reese, Amelia had found meaning in the time they had spent together. His betrayal had made that feeling fade and lose shape, but she hadn't been able to discard him entirely. And the reason for that had been that he hadn't directly told her everything until now.

But now, through reenactment magic, she had heard Reese's true feelings. With this, she would be able to break free from her memories of the past completely.

"You spread a groundless rumor and sullied Amelia's reputation, then went on to conspire to take control over a countship. How wicked you are. Amelia won't be the one being expelled. That will be you two."

"Ah..."

At Sarge's words, Reese crumpled to the floor.

Those who did not graduate from the Royal Academy of Magic were forbidden to continue using magic. For members of nobility, it was akin to having their futures closed off.

Reese's value to the Lenia family as an earth magic user would also cease to exist.

And of course, even Amelia's father would be unlikely to make her marry Reese, who had caused such an uproar and belittled Amelia, and who would even lose the privilege of using magic.

"Unlike you, Amelia is exceptional. She has only just enrolled in the academy, and yet she's all but confirmed to be accepted into the Special A class. Plus, she has been assisting me with my research. Since you tried to bring such an incredible person down, your crime is a serious one. Be prepared for what's to come."

Advancing into the Special A class meant one could become a magic researcher in the future. Furthermore, it was well understood that to be Sarge's assistant, one needed a level of knowledge far exceeding the norm.

The crowd of students also seemed surprised to learn of Amelia's capabilities.

Hearing that, Reese bit his lip ruefully. Amelia had heard that he himself had fallen from the A class to the C class.

Now that she thought of it, Reese had never been fond of Amelia studying magic.

Since the plan was for him to be adopted into the Lenia family, they had often studied magic together at her domain. She remembered that whenever her tutor had praised Amelia for her excellence, Reese's mood would turn sour.

Reese had told her that since he would be the one inheriting the title of count, Amelia didn't have to spend so much time studying magic, and that she should rather inspect and write up data on the farmlands. Considering that, the reason he had taken her to make their rounds of the farms together so often must have been to keep Amelia from studying magic.

"You envied Amelia's brilliance, so to gain an advantage over her, you tried to diminish her worth, didn't you?"

That was why Sarge's words must have been true.

"...Tch."

"Sarge!"

Enraged, Reese attempted to approach Sarge, but there was no way Kaid would have allowed that to happen. He instantly seized Reese and handed him over to the academy guards.

Sarah was left behind, sitting on the floor in a daze. She, too, ended up being taken away by the guards. Until their official punishment was decided, the two of them would be confined to their rooms.

"But all we did was fall in love with each other..." That was the last thing Sarah muttered.

Out of all the people that she had made her allies, none remained who would support her claim.

"Amelia, are you all right?"

Amelia raised her head towards the concerned, kind voice; Sarge was peering at her with a worried look.

When she saw his face, her tears began to overflow. She didn't want to cry in front of so many people, but she couldn't stop herself.

Sarge swiftly wiped away her tears. He had touched her with just his fingertip, but the gentle warmth of it healed her aching heart.

"Thank you, Sarge."

Reese was no longer there.

The rumor that had caused Amelia so much suffering would soon subside as well. From today onward, she would finally be able to begin a normal school life.

He suggested she should rest for the remainder of the day, so she

went straight back to her dormitory. After changing out of her school uniform into her regular clothes, she plopped herself down on her bed. It wasn't exactly proper behavior, but there was no one else around, and she felt today of all days, she deserved a break.

It had been two days since she had been able to rest in her own room like this.

A lot has happened...

The matter of Reese was only the first step of the process. She still didn't know how her father would respond, but she didn't think he would want her to remain engaged to someone who couldn't use magic.

She slowly recalled all the things that had happened from the moment Reese stopped sending letters up until the present.

She had faced a lot of adversity in that time, but now that she thought about it, it hadn't all been terrible. If all that hadn't occurred, then she wouldn't have been able to become close with Sarge, nor would she have been able to meet Julius and Marie.

Above all, if she had ended up marrying Reese, she wouldn't have been able to continue studying magic.

It's not like I dislike managing our lands, so I probably would have been content to live that way.

But she wouldn't have been happy with Reese, who detested her so much as to set her up. Surely at some point, their relationship would have fallen apart.

She would never see the man who had been her fiancé for ten years ever again.

That thought, however, did not make her sad in the slightest. The only thing she felt now was the still-lingering warmth of Sarge's finger, which had kindly wiped away her tears.

As Amelia softly touched her own cheek, she suddenly remembered.

That's right. The first time we met, we danced together. And he even carried me when my leg was injured...

At the time, she had just felt overwhelmed by Sarge's status. But now that she was thinking about it, it had been an absurdly embarrassing but nevertheless precious experience.

There would be many opportunities in the future for her to help with his research, but there was unlikely to be another time when they would have that kind of physical contact.

Lying on her bed, she gazed at the ceiling and sighed. It wasn't a sigh filled with her usual sadness but one that contained a hint of bittersweetness.

Before the end of the day, Amelia wrote a letter reporting everything that had happened to her father.

In all likelihood, her engagement to Reese would soon be broken off. She would go along with whatever her father told her to, but even though Amelia wasn't at fault, things had reached this state of tumult. It would probably be difficult to find her a new fiancé. If it came to it, then her younger male cousin would probably have to inherit the title of count. His name was Sol, he was one year younger than her, and he was quite capable.

I was also being careless... I never thought Reese would betray me.

She had known him for such a long time, she had come to regard him as family.

She had been too naive.

That naivety would likely close off many opportunities for her future.

There's no use regretting things that are over and done with. I just need to think about what to do next.

She shook her head to dispel her thoughts.

If her cousin Sol inherited the title, Amelia would have to leave home and become independent. She would give up on marrying and live alone, and in order to do that, she would have to find a proper job.

Julius said that if I were to get into the Special A class, I could become a magic researcher.

That seemed the ideal situation.

She would be sad to leave the Lenia domain, having been involved in managing its affairs for so long, but Sol was an earnest, kind person. She could leave things up to him without much worry.

Plus, Amelia wanted to continue learning about magic. By doing so, she would be able to help Sarge as his assistant.

Even if she did take a husband to inherit the title of count, she would probably feel a debt to her husband for having had to marry a girl with such a poor reputation. She would much rather make an honest living and live freely than live like that.

From here on, she would study even more seriously, for the sake of her future.

Amelia settled on that as her future goal.

And she would forget all about Reese.

She was a bit concerned about his punishment, but whatever the result may be, it was his own doing.

Chapter 4: The Things I Want to Achieve

Amelia was determined to study hard and get into the Special A class, but the events of the following day left her in a daze: she heard that Reese and Sarah had eloped.

They eloped...? Why would they do that?

Just as Sarge had said, Reese had been expelled from school. The day of the incident, Reese had slipped out of his dorm, and, together with Sarah, disappeared.

Although they had been taken away by the guards, they hadn't been dealt an official punishment yet, so no one had been keeping an eye on them. It was also likely that the guards at the dormitory hadn't thought the two would run away that day.

Left behind in Reese's dorm room was a letter signed with both their names, stating that no matter what hardships they may face, their true love would remain firm.

True love.

When she'd heard that, Amelia couldn't help but sigh.

Regardless of the truth, this had happened right after those nasty rumors had spread throughout the academy. There were sure to appear those who would say Amelia had torn apart these two lovers and driven Reese out of school.

But Sarge had also been involved in this case, so the situation would likely not reach the point it had before.

Nonetheless, by eloping with Sarah, Reese had managed to besmirch Amelia's reputation to the very end. After Sarge had driven him into a corner, rather than feeling remorse for his own actions, he had decided to put Amelia in an even more unfavorable position.

Amelia wished he could have at least returned to his old, kind self after all this, but that person had probably never existed in the first place.

In any case, rumors came and went. Rather than letting herself be troubled by all this, Amelia now had to put all her effort into studying for her future.

Reese had ended up being expelled while his whereabouts were unknown, but since an official investigation hadn't been carried out, Sarah's punishment was still undecided. As a result, apparently the Caria family was preparing to press charges against Reese for the

abduction of their daughter.

In response, Reese's father, Marquis Thurma, was trying to avoid legal action by officially making Sarah Reese's fiancée. For that engagement to happen, the two families were engaged in various negotiations.

As a result of those negotiations, the Viscount Caria eventually dropped the charges and accepted Marquis Thurma's offer.

So with their whereabouts still unknown, Reese and Sarah's betrothal was made official. If they were to find out about that, would they have been happy to hear their true love had finally come to fruition?

If the two of them were found and an official punishment was dispensed, Sarah would likely be expelled as well. Their engagement, much like their families' search for them, was a mere formality for the sake of keeping up appearances. Both families seemed to be hoping that the two would remain missing.

However, the academy was conducting a proper investigation to bring them back and deliver a suitable punishment.

Of course, Amelia and Reese's engagement had been officially broken off.

When her parents found out what Reese had done, they immediately went to complain to Marquis Thurma and then went through the official procedures to end his son's engagement to Amelia. Amelia's father had also requested the Thurmas pay a settlement for Reese's wrongdoings to show that Amelia had done nothing wrong.

After the scandal of their son running off with his girlfriend and the negotiations with the Caria family, it seemed the Thurmas were left in considerable financial trouble.

Nevertheless, since the fault lay with their son, they complied with the settlement and paid the full amount.

But now her father and Reese's could no longer associate with each other as they once had. The bonds they had spent years building were now destroyed just as Amelia's bond with Reese had been, and she was left feeling depressed, thinking it was the result of her own failure to notice Reese's ruse.

As if that were not enough, Amelia's father had not given up on finding her a marriage partner; he was busy trying to choose a new fiancé for her.

Her mother made a suggestion—why not allow Amelia to walk the path of becoming a magical researcher, given her exceptional ability? But Amelia's father would not listen to his wife.

Wanting his own child to inherit the domain was not the only reason her father was so obstinate when it came to Amelia. Earth magic users were more often male than female. He still hadn't given

up on bringing earth magic back to their family.

He knew that he would be more likely to find an earth mage as a partner for Amelia rather than for her cousin Sol.

Amelia had just ended a long-term engagement, and earth magic users were very valuable. She would not be able to find another one so easily. In the meantime, Amelia continued to study hard as she had planned. At this rate, if a fiancé couldn't be arranged for her, maybe her father would eventually give up.

Her mother, uncle, and Sol—basically everyone but her father—agreed that Sol should inherit the title of count.

“While all that may be true, I think it's a bit too much staying cooped up in a private room studying until closing time every single day.”

The one saying that reprovingly was Marie, the girl who was one year Amelia's senior and who had been looking after her like an older sister. For Amelia, who had not once returned to her original class, Marie was the only one she could call a friend.

“Are you making sure to take your lunches?”

“Yes, I eat lunch with Sarge.”

Julius had asked her to do so, so she was taking her lunch breaks, at least, with Sarge. However, there were times when she would go to call for him in the library, and the two would become distracted by reading, and before they realized it, it would be the end of the school day.

She felt badly whenever she saw how exhausted Kaid's face looked after he'd tried over and over to get their attention.

Since she and Sarge were classmates, Marie knew well just how much worse he was than Amelia about that sort of thing.

“I'm not sure whether you and Prince Sarge are suitable for each other or if you being together is more dangerous,” she said with a complicated expression.

While Marie looked after Amelia, who would become immersed in her studies, Julius looked after Sarge, who would get so absorbed in his research that he would forget to eat and drink. As a result, the four of them spent a great deal of time together. Apparently Marie and Julius would often exchange information, so they would spend time together even without Sarge and Amelia.

“I think my brother is going to become engaged to Lady Marie.”

Amelia couldn't help but grin at Sarge's words. She had come to the royal castle at his request to help him write up some documents.

“I think you're right. They seem like a good match.”

Even Amelia could see they seemed to grow ever closer each time they met.

Amelia thought it was charming how the strong-willed Marie

would blush and go silent in front of Julius.

Marie was a mere countess, but the Edori family was rich in both assets and influence. It seemed the fact that she hadn't been deceived by the rumor and had instead helped Amelia was the deciding factor.

"As for you, I heard your engagement has been successfully ended."

"Yes, my engagement to Reese has been formally broken off. But my father still hasn't given up on finding me a new fiancé..."

Anyone would do as long as they could use earth magic. It was a bit frightening the way her father was searching so unabashedly.

"Is that so? But why is Count Lenia so fixated on earth magic?"

It made sense that earth magic would be quite the boon to a territory like their own that was filled with farmland, but that didn't mean the lord himself had to be able to use earth magic.

"I think that probably has to do with what happened with my great-grandfather."

Until earth magic had been lost to the Lenia family, soil improvement magic and growth promotion magic had enriched the land considerably. But nowadays, between the lack of earth magic and the unfavorable weather, harvests had only been half of what they used to be.

That situation was precisely why her father wished to revive earth magic. He wanted it so badly, neither Amelia's words nor her mother's would reach his ears.

"If that's the case, it would be good to raise the perceived worth of water magic. So much so that it would be considered a loss to no longer have a water mage as a lord."

"Sarge?"

Sarge placed a thesis he had written in front of Amelia on top of the stacks of books and her own documents.

"The new variety is resistant to cold-weather damage but weak to insects. I think water magic could be the key to solving that problem."

"...Water magic?"

Water magic was used for healing. So perhaps the magic she'd thought she could only use for watering would actually be able to help the land.

That possibility made Amelia's heart pound with excitement.

If the new variety could even be protected against insect damage, it would grow better, and the harvest would increase. With a way to prevent insect damage, there was no doubt they would be able to return to their previous crop yields.

Plus, if they could implement the magic as Sarge said, then they could also change the popular perception of water magic, which had traditionally been regarded only as healing magic.

“I’ll create a magic that can do that. But water magic is not my specialty, so I’ll have to ask you to lend me your assistance. I’m sorry to ask this of you after so much has happened, and of course you should only focus on it when you can take a break from studying for the exam.”

“Understood. I will do whatever I can to help,” she said, nodding repeatedly at his words.

Creating new magic was not a simple feat.

But for Sarge, it might be possible.

She was extremely honored to be able to help him with something like this.

And so Amelia would study for the exam in the mornings with Marie, and in the afternoons she would help Sarge with his research.

Marie, who had now officially become Julius’s fiancée, was worried about Amelia; she frequently advised her to make sure to rest every now and then.

That day, Marie had invited Amelia to study with her during the afternoon as well, but Amelia had refused, saying, “Even if I rest for just one day, Sarge will get further in his research, and it’ll be hard for me to catch up.”

She had to focus quite a lot to assist with his research, and she would often be so worn out afterwards that she would go to bed without eating dinner.

Regardless, being involved in the development of new water magic was such an honor, and Amelia herself was getting a lot of enjoyment out of it.

“But if you keep this up, sooner or later you’ll collapse.”

“No, I’ll be fine. I think I’m actually more resilient than Sarge, so I’ll rest when he does.”

“I thought you would be the first, but it seems it might be him. I’ll have to consult with Julius,” Marie muttered to herself, and then she looked at Amelia. “I was a little worried. I thought maybe you were so upset by the Reese situation that you were throwing yourself into research to forget about it.”

“Absolutely not!” Amelia responded hastily. “It’s true that at first I was having a tough time, since I didn’t understand why Reese was acting the way he was. But now, I don’t even have the time to spare him a passing thought. I really am just enjoying the process of creating new water magic and helping Sarge with his research.”

Apparently, her father had become obsessed with earth magic when a lord he was friends with had made an earth mage his successor as head of the family. That lord would speak passionately about how great earth magic was and each time would bring up the

story of Amelia's great-grandfather, which seemed to have influenced her father greatly. Soon afterwards, he'd decided to make Amelia, who had been five years old at the time, Reese's fiancée.

Being able to use water magic was completely useless.

Those were the words her father had told himself at the time, but Amelia had felt since childhood that those words were really directed towards her.

But if they could perfect Sarge's water magic, then it could become just as valuable as earth magic. She was happy that she would be able to assist in that endeavor.

"Oh, really? If that's what you wish, I suppose I can't stop you, but make sure to look after yourself too, all right? Don't overestimate yourself just because you're feeling fine now."

"I won't. Thank you for your concern."

Marie's words, so filled with consideration, enveloped Amelia's heart in kindness.

Hatred and sadness did not persist forever. Eventually, she would forget about Reese once and for all.

"I know you're busy, but will you be attending the party to announce our engagement next month?"

Julius and Marie were officially engaged, and it seemed their goal with next month's party was to make their engagement widely known. Foreign envoys would be invited to the celebration as well, and Marie would soon be busy with preparations.

"Yes, I will be attending. Sophia strongly requested that I come, since Sarge is more likely to go if I do."

Since Sophia had promised to prepare everything, including a dress for Amelia, and had begged her to come, Amelia couldn't refuse.

It was also a party for her dear friend and for Julius, who habitually looked out for her. She wanted to celebrate the two of them wholeheartedly.

"In any case, you were asked personally by Her Royal Highness the Crown Princess... I feel like royalty is surrounding me on all sides. But I feel reassured that you'll be right here with me, so maybe things are fine this way."

"Marie...?" Amelia tried to press her for an explanation, but Marie just said never mind and smiled elegantly.

Sophia had requested that Amelia come to the royal castle on her next day off. She had invited Marie as well, so Marie and Amelia promised to go together that day.

When the day came, the two of them boarded the castle carriage that had been sent to their dorms.

Marie had a residence in the royal capital, so she had often visited the castle to attend parties. This time, however, was her first personal

visit. In contrast with her, Amelia, who had never visited the royal castle prior to enrolling in the academy, now visited often in order to assist in Sarge's research.

The castle maids recognized her now; they made to lead her to where Sarge was, so she had to tell them she was actually there for Sophia that day. Apparently he had been in the castle's library since that morning, so once Amelia was done with her business, she planned to go meet him as well.

They met with Princess Sophia, who had been waiting for their arrival with several designers. The plan that day was to decide on the design of the dresses they would wear to the engagement party.

Sophia warmly welcomed them in, saying "There's no need for any formal greeting. We're going to be sisters-in-law, after all." It was true that Marie, who was now Julius's fiancée, would soon become Sophia's sister-in-law. But it was a different story for Amelia. She thought she wouldn't be able to get away with the same behavior, but Sophia told her they were friends and that the same went for her.

"There's only a month left, so let's hurry up and make a decision," Sophia said, carefully examining the large quantity of cloth that had been laid out.

"Julius has black hair and green eyes, so your dress should be green. As for jewels... Let's go with black diamonds. For Amelia, maybe a more vibrant green dress and yellow sapphires."

It made sense that Marie would be dressed in the colors of her fiancé's hair and eyes, but Amelia was reluctant to dress in her ex-fiancé's colors.

She was about to suggest that she would wear another color when she was struck by a thought.

Reese was not the only one who had golden hair and green eyes.

This vibrant green and beautiful, glimmering gold were Sarge's colors.

"Um, Sophia, these colors..."

"Oh, do you dislike them?"

Amelia was unsure how to respond to Sophia, who was grinning cheerfully.

"Of course I don't dislike them, it's just..."

Someone might get the wrong impression.

If that happened, it could cause problems for Sarge. After Amelia explained her reasoning, choosing her words carefully, Sophia suddenly looked serious.

"That would actually be helpful. I'm sorry. I know we keep asking a lot from you, but..."

Envoys from neighboring countries were planning to attend the party, and there were rumors that agents of the Beltz Empire might try

to slip in among them as well. While situated far away from the Kingdom of Bedeiht, the empire was a terrifying country with a great deal of land and considerable military might. There seemed to have been some dangerous developments within the empire, which also seemed to have been the reason for the hurried selection of Julius's fiancée.

Of course security would be tight, so no suspicious individuals would be allowed entry into the castle. But with Sarge so preoccupied with his research, who knew where he might wander off to? The royal family had concluded that the best way to make him behave was to keep Amelia by his side.

And it was also best to pretend that the boy and girl of marriageable age spending so much time alone together were actually an engaged couple.

Having been entreated so by Sophia, Amelia could only respond with "I will do my very best."

While it was true that this measure was ultimately for Sarge's safety, there was no room for nervousness when it came to disguising themselves as an engaged couple under the official recognition of the royal family.

Amelia was worried that, even though it was only a pretense, Sarge might dislike having Amelia play his fiancée. Sophia and Marie both gave her exasperated looks and said that would definitely not be the case.

With Sophia's recommendations, they decided on their dress designs, and Amelia promised to come again with Marie for the fitting.

As they parted, Marie wished Amelia good luck. She didn't know what she was wishing her good luck for, but she nodded anyway. Amelia then headed straight to the library, where Sarge was.

Noticing her, Sarge immediately stood up and greeted her.

"Amelia, is your meeting over?"

"Yes, Sophia has kindly arranged everything."

"I see. I wanted to send you a dress, but I guess I can't do that yet."

"...What?"

She raised her face at his unexpected words, but Sarge was only smiling gently at her.

That evening, instead of staying over at the castle, she returned to her dorm. There, she found that a letter had arrived from her father. Apparently, he and her mother would be coming to the capital to attend Julius and Marie's engagement party.

He'd written that they would be bringing along a boy to escort her, since her engagement had just been broken off, so she had to let

him know that would be unnecessary.

The boy was probably someone whom her father had picked to be her potential new fiancé.

If Sophia hadn't made her request, Amelia probably would have gone along with her father's plan. But no matter who that boy was, she couldn't possibly prioritize him over Sarge.

I'll probably cause a commotion if I tell him I'll be escorted by Sarge, so I'll just say I asked an upperclassman from the academy.

They would find out at any rate on the day of the party, but that would be better than them causing an uproar within their domain.

Amelia's and Marie's dresses, which had been prepared at the highest priority, were incredibly splendid items of clothing. As the guest of honor, Marie of course received a dress of the finest quality, but Amelia's dress was also one of the most magnificent she had ever seen.

It made her anxious, and she consulted Marie, but her friend just gave her a refreshed smile, as if her worries had disappeared, and told Amelia that since she would be standing by Sarge's side, this level of finery was a matter of course.

Needless to say, she couldn't be looking shabby as she walked next to Sarge. His image came to her mind.

The development of new water magic was progressing little by little.

For that reason, they had moved from working in the academy library to the castle library and were carrying out experiments in a field in a corner of the garden, so Amelia had begun staying the night at the royal castle more frequently. At some point, the guest room had effectively turned into Amelia's bedroom, and she had even begun to leave some of her personal belongings there, like a change of clothes, a spare school uniform, and study materials.

But since Kaid the knight escort wasn't around in the castle, the two of them would often lose track of time while immersed in their research. They worried Sophia and Sarge's brothers whenever they pushed themselves too hard, so they had to be careful in that regard.

Even with that in mind, today was turning into another late night confined in the castle library.

"Sarge, it seems that the fields that were watered using magic suffered less damage," she said, handing him the past data combined with the results of their experiments in the castle garden.

Amelia had carried out an experiment in which she planted the same type of seeds, then had Sarge grow them to a certain extent using his growth promotion magic.

Sarge took the documents from her and glanced over them quickly.

Amelia had begun watering the crops with magic long ago in the hopes that even her water magic could be of some use to the domain. She had been casually recording data from those crops for the past five years. Now that she was looking over them again, she determined that using water imbued with magic to water crops allowed them to grow more robustly.

The difference was so small that if she hadn't been keeping track for so long, she probably would not have noticed.

"The watering magic I'd been using allowed me to spread water over a large area."

"You developed it on your own?"

"I wouldn't go as far as to say I developed it. I just came up with something that I thought would be useful for the farms."

Water magic was regarded as being useful only for healing and removing toxins. There was no doubt that the power to heal people was a wonderful ability. Amelia had been shown gratitude for healing those who got injured in their domain.

But what her father wanted was magic that would be agriculturally useful. That was why Amelia had created her watering magic.

"And what ancient magic words did you use for the watering magic spell?" he asked.

Amelia replied with "water," "wide range," and "downpour."

"So if we were to add protection against insect damage to that..."

"We wouldn't just be able to prevent damage with watering magic, the crops would probably be able to go strong even with the worsening weather."

At Amelia's suggestion, Sarge began developing the new magic.

Already-existing magic could be activated by using one's magical power to chant an established spell, but to create new magic, one first had to activate it by drawing a magic circle with ancient words and patterns. For spells like Amelia's watering magic, one could draw a circle with the meanings "water," "wide range," and "downpour," so it wasn't that difficult. Once it had been used successfully, one would just have to chant those ancient words as a spell.

However, chanting a spell consumed one's magical energy, so more complicated spells required that much more power. Where normal magic would require one or two spells, more complex magic could require up to four.

Those with exceptional power, like Sarge, could use any level of magic.

But what the two of them wanted to create was magic that anyone with a water affinity could easily use. To do that, they needed to keep the spell as concise as possible to limit the amount of power used.

“Since your watering magic already uses three incantations, we can only add one more. But not just anyone can use four incantations...”

Amelia was deep in thought.

In addition to “water,” “wide range,” and “downpour,” they also needed to add “pest” and “protect” as well as the water magic spell “detox.” Although they were trying to protect against pests, their target was food, so in order to make sure it wasn’t poisonous, adding “detox” was necessary.

“Since detox and watering are already existing water magic, we can use those as the foundation, and then we’ll need to add the effects of ‘pest’ and ‘protect.’”

“Right.”

Since the end product of their labors would be a new form of water magic, Sarge, who had earth and light affinities, would not be able to use it. But he could still draw the magic circle. So Sarge would design the magic circle while Amelia would be the one to test out the magic.

But the two of them could not spend all their time developing water magic. Amelia also needed to study for her exam, and Sarge also needed to put effort into his earth magic and botany research.

Furthermore, Julius and Marie’s engagement party was only ten days away now, so they needed to prepare for that.

“I’m sorry—tomorrow I need to visit Sophia so we can match jewels to my dress and decide on a hairstyle...”

“Ah, understood. You don’t need to come by tomorrow, then. I’m sure that’ll take some time.”

In retrospect, Sarge’s words seemed to indicate that he had known even then who would be waiting for Amelia with Sophia tomorrow.

The next day, Amelia and Marie made their way to Sophia, and, seeing the beautiful woman who was sitting next to her, Amelia’s eyes went wide. She exchanged a glance with Marie and then hurriedly curtsied.

“You’re Amelia, aren’t you? Thank you for always doing so much for Sarge.”

Her hair was shiny and golden.

Her vibrant green eyes were exactly like Sarge’s.

Her unfaded beauty was also similar to his.

The beautiful queen, who was Sophia’s mother-in-law, looked at Amelia and smiled gently. Amelia and Marie were too nervous even to look up, while Sophia and the queen seemed to be enjoying themselves as they picked out the jewels the younger women would wear.

For Marie, they picked a luxurious piece resplendent with large

gems.

As for Amelia, they picked something delicate and beautifully crafted.

Afterwards, they took their time to decide on hairstyles that would suit their dresses, and then Amelia and Marie were invited to chat over a tea party.

“How did you meet Sarge?” the queen asked, her eyes sparkling as if she were a young girl chatting about love interests.

Amelia answered, choosing her words carefully, “We first met at the new student welcome party at the academy. I was having a bit of trouble, since I was unable to contact my fiancé, and that was when Sarge came to save me.”

“Oh, is that so? He is a very kind boy, after all.”

The queen’s words were overflowing with love for her son. This kingdom’s princes weren’t the only ones who got along well; it seemed the royal parents also had a good relationship with their children.

“You’re helping with his research too, is that right? Sarge has always pushed himself too far, ever since he was a child. I worry about him.”

“That’s right...”

She wanted to say that she tried to stop him as much as she could, but in fact, the one who would usually stop him was Kaid, and he had to include Amelia in his scolding as well. The queen must have guessed as much from the way Amelia averted her gaze.

“I heard you two are a lot alike, and it’s true, isn’t it?”

Feeling embarrassed as the queen giggled happily, Amelia made herself small and lowered her head.

After bombarding Marie with similar questions, the queen left, seeming satisfied. The two girls remained unable to move for a while even after their pent-up nerves had released them.

The only one who had kept her composure was Sophia, who was smiling as she reminisced about the past. “I remember how nervous I was at first. How nostalgic.”

Marie kept repeating, as if from the bottom of her heart, “I’m glad you’re here with me, Amelia.” At first, Marie had been the one to tell her not to overwork herself, but recently, she’d been asking Amelia to come with her everywhere.

The queen, Sophia, and Marie all knew that Amelia was only going to be acting as Sarge’s fiancée for the engagement party, so she didn’t understand why they were treating her as if she were his actual fiancée.

What she didn’t know was that Marie was thinking that if Amelia couldn’t escape, she might as well be captured sooner rather than later.

Marie said she would go to greet Julius and then return home, so Amelia similarly decided to say hi to Sarge before going back as well. He had told her she didn't have to come that day, but she thought it would be rude to not say hi while she was at the castle.

Plus, she was tired from her unexpected encounter with the queen. If she could meet with Sarge, she was sure she'd recover some of her energy.

She was approaching the library with that thought in mind when she suddenly heard an adorable voice.

"Umm, in this case, would just 'growth promotion' possibly be sufficient?"

She turned towards the unfamiliar voice in surprise to see that next to Sarge was a young lady intensely studying an open book.

She looked a little younger than Amelia. She was a very cute girl with hair as red as a strawberry.

Sarge had stopped his own research to teach her magic.

His specialty was earth magic.

So this girl must have been an earth magic user.

The day he had told her not to come, another girl was by his side.

Not only that, but she was a cute girl who could use earth magic.

Shocked, Amelia stood stock still.

She couldn't help but dislike the fact that there was another girl by his side.

Whatever it was—aiding his research or simply being by his side—did Amelia really want that to be reserved for her alone?

What am I thinking...? I'm not entitled to that...

"Amelia?"

Sarge had noticed her standing there as if frozen solid and called out to her. The girl next to him also stood up hurriedly.

"Are you finished up over there? My mother intruded on your meeting, didn't she? Sorry about that."

"N-No, not at all. She was very kind," she managed to answer as she kept her attention fixed on the girl next to him.

Sarge's behavior was the same as ever. If anything, he seemed to be in a good mood. Amelia wasn't sure what kind of face she should make, so she dropped her gaze.

"You're just in time. I want you to meet her," he said. But then, seeing the melancholy way Amelia had looked away from him, he became uncharacteristically flustered.

"Amelia? Did something happen?"

"N-No. I'm fine."

Amelia shook her head and then looked at Sarge and the young girl in turn.

Now that she got another look at her, she really was cute. She

suiting Sarge.

"My nerves have just made me tired, that's all. I'm sorry for having disturbed you," she said. She bowed her head politely and then made to leave.

"Wait, Amelia."

Sarge had noticed that Amelia had been looking at the girl next to him with a face filled with sadness, so he called out to stop her in a frantic voice.

"This is Kaid's younger sister. She just came by on an errand."

"...Kaid's younger sister?" she echoed reflexively.

"That's right. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Amelia. My name is Meena. Thank you for always looking after my older brother. I'm glad to be able to meet you today."

The girl who had introduced herself as Meena bowed her head. She must have heard about Amelia from Kaid. Now that Amelia thought about it, the girl's red hair was exactly the same color as Kaid's.

Since this was his younger sister, Amelia felt she needed to express that it was rather he who looked after her, so she hastily bowed her head and said, "Not at all. I'm always causing Kaid trouble..."

The girl laughed and said that was part of her brother's job. Her bright smile was very endearing.

"Meena is the second daughter of Count Eded, and she's one year younger than you, Amelia. She'll be enrolling in the academy next year."

Since Kaid escorted Sarge only within the academy, Amelia had never seen him in the castle. So why was his younger sister with Sarge?

Sarge continued talking about Meena, oblivious to Amelia's puzzlement.

"Count Eded's domain is near the royal capital, but Meena prefers land rich in nature, so she wants to live in a place like that in the future. She can also use earth magic."

Sarge went on to say he hadn't thought there would be such an ideal person so close by.

Does he mean...the ideal woman?

She had never thought she would hear him say those words.

She didn't want to hear him say them.

She unconsciously clutched her chest and looked down.

She was also surprised by how much this situation shocked her.

But Sarge's next words were even more shocking.

"What do you think about making her your cousin's fiancée?"

Amelia paused for several moments before saying, "My cousin?"

Her eyes opened wide at his jarring words.

She had told Sarge about her cousin before, and about how he was very capable, and that in the event that a new fiancé couldn't be decided on for Amelia, he would be the one to inherit the title of count.

"Unfortunately, I think developing new water magic will take some more time. It'll be a problem if your fiancé is decided upon in the meantime, so I've been looking for a young lady who could meet your father's criteria."

Although Meena was a countess like herself, her brother was Sarge's knight bodyguard and thus a part of the upper echelons of the nobility. But despite that, this girl wanted to live in a place with a lot of nature, and she could even use earth magic.

Amelia's cousin was, like Meena, a year her junior and would be entering the academy next year.

He was an earnest, kind boy, so there was no possibility of him doing what Reese had done. And she had never heard anything about him liking someone either.

"Yes, she is ideal," she managed to respond, relieved that Sarge hadn't meant that Meena was *his* ideal woman.

Meena's expression brightened instantly. "I'm so honored that you would say so, Miss Amelia. With Prince Sarge's help, I'm going to work hard to get even better at earth magic."

Amelia's cousin Sol had also been invited to Julius and Marie's engagement party and would be in attendance. It seemed Sarge planned to introduce the two of them then.

He said they also had to consider whether the two were compatible, so they would discuss things after they met, but Meena seemed enthusiastic.

She was a very lovely girl. Amelia also thought it'd be great if things could work out.

If there weren't any issues after they met with each other, they could probably proceed with discussing things with both their families.

Eventually, Amelia and Sarge would perfect their new water magic. If that magic came into widespread use, then even if Meena and Sol's children ended up being born with a water magic affinity, no one would be disappointed.

Rather, she wouldn't let that happen under any circumstances.

"Thank you for everything, Sarge."

He had said that he did not want Amelia's fiancé to be decided on before they could finish developing the new earth magic.

Those words alone had been enough to make her happy.

She wanted to continue doing her best to help him.

Ultimately, Sarge was the one who explained the situation to her parents.

Amelia and her parents, who had arrived in the royal capital to attend the engagement party a few days later, were summoned to the castle.

Unlike Amelia, who had been to the castle so often that she even had her own room, her parents seemed ill at ease. Of course, they had been called to the royal castle with no explanation, so it was natural they'd be anxious. Not only that, but their daughter had become so fully familiar with the place that even the maids knew her.

If they had been brought to the presence chamber in their current state, they probably would have collapsed from stress. But Sarge was waiting for them in a guest room, and there was only one attendant on standby in a corner.

"Amelia, thank you for taking the trouble to come here."

"Oh, no, it's no trouble at all."

The truth was, not even Amelia knew exactly why Sarge had called her and her parents to the castle. Since she would be acting as Sarge's partner at the party tomorrow, she figured he wanted to discuss the details with them and to get all their stories straight.

But after they exchanged greetings, they began discussing the condition of the Lenia domain's crops and the fluctuation of grain prices and then moved on to talk about Sarge's specialties, botany and earth magic.

And then Sarge began to speak enthusiastically about the extent of Amelia's contributions to his research.

Even Amelia's father, who had at first been nervous, became more talkative when they began discussing the Lenia domain.

"This year, after we switched entirely to the newly developed grains, we were naturally nervous. But the results seem like they will be even better than I'd hoped."

"Thanks to the Lenia domain taking such a proactive approach, more people have considered planting it this year."

"It is a great honor to hear that."

As the conversation progressed, her parents' fascination with Sarge's deep intellectuality and broad range of knowledge became increasingly clear.

"Amelia's impeccable memory and her precise data have helped me many times over. She has already become essential to me."

Hearing Sarge praise his daughter so highly made Amelia's father tear up slightly.

"I want to continue to have her by my side, supporting me. However, I've heard that Amelia is the sole successor to the Lenia

domain.”

“That’s not a problem. My younger brother has two children. I intend to adopt one of them to make him the successor.”

Both Amelia and her mother were shocked to hear her father, who had been so obsessed with earth magic, say that so readily.

“Amelia’s cousin. Does he have a fiancée?”

At last, Sarge had broached the subject. Amelia’s breath caught in her throat, and she peeked at her father.

“No, his fiancée has not been decided as of yet, but next year he will be enrolling in the academy. There are plans to arrange his engagement before then.”

“Next year, hmm?” Sarge muttered, then acted as if he was thinking deeply.

“The younger sister of my knight escort is the same age as him. Although she is the second daughter of Count Eded, she’s an earth magic user. Apparently she’s said that she wants to make good use of her magic by marrying into a family with thriving agricultural lands. She has already met with Amelia. How about making her his fiancée?”

He then said they would probably be well suited for each other, and Amelia’s father gasped.

With Sarge as the mediator, this engagement was already a sure thing.

Count Lenia’s daughter, whose long-term engagement had become a blank slate and who was worried about her future, was acknowledged by the fourth prince as an excellent assistant, and the earth magic user the count had been yearning for might marry into his family. Sarge went on to tell her father, who looked like all his dreams had come true, that with Amelia’s cooperation, they were in the process of developing new water magic.

“New water magic...?”

“That’s right. It will take some time yet, but if we’re successful, I believe it can save this country’s future. Water magic is not my specialty, so Amelia has been constantly helping me.”

“Water magic...and Amelia...helping His Highness...”

Amelia’s father looked down, his hands clasped tightly together.

They ended their conversation there. Amelia and her parents left the castle, with her father brooding in silence the whole journey.

Amelia would have to part ways with her parents halfway in order to return to her dorm, and so, feeling a bit concerned about her father, she spoke with her mother.

She probably wouldn’t have the time to speak with her on the day of the party.

“Amelia, I’m glad to see you happy. You seem to be leading a full life.”

“I am. I’m sorry for making you worry with everything that went on with Reese. You even told me to tell you if I ever ran into problems...”

“It’s all right. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m always rooting for your happiness.”

“Thank you, mother.”

Amelia parted ways with her mother and was about to return to her dorm when her father, who had been silent that whole time, spoke up.

“Actually...I brought along someone to be your partner for tomorrow.”

“Father...” she couldn’t help but say in a reproachful tone. She’d even sent him a letter telling him that was unnecessary.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been so stubborn about earth magic, I’ve been neglecting your happiness.”

“Huh?”

She hadn’t been expecting him to apologize. She looked at him, dumbfounded.

“Prince Sarge seems like a wonderful person.”

“He is. I’m proud to be able to help him with his research.”

Her father nodded repeatedly.

“Come home for summer break,” he said. Then he went straight into the carriage and she could no longer see the expression on his face.

She watched as the carriage left with her parents, who would be staying in an inn exclusively for nobles. Then she returned to her dorm.

I can’t believe father actually said something like that...

Sarge had been able to reason with her father, who had been so obstinate about earth magic and never considered Amelia herself, and they had even been able to reach a decision about her cousin’s engagement. She was happy that someone like him had said she was indispensable to him.

Tomorrow she would attend the party as Sarge’s fiancée.

Back in her dorm room, Amelia opened her window and gazed out at the sky to quell her elation.

It was the day of the party.

Amelia awoke that morning, got dressed, and waited for the carriage to arrive to pick her up.

She boarded the carriage to the royal castle. There she met up with Sophia and Marie and began the preparations for the day.

They donned the beautiful dresses that had been tailored for the occasion, styled their hair, and adorned themselves with jewels. The

maids who had been efficiently attending to them praised their beautiful appearances after they were fully dressed.

The bright green dress and yellow sapphires were Sarge's colors.

When Amelia looked in the mirror at the image of herself wearing his colors, she remembered the day of the new student welcome party.

That was a rough time...

She hadn't even known there was going to be a party and had had to make hasty arrangements for an old dress to be sent to her. She remembered how that dress had also been the color of Reese's eyes.

At that time, the only one who had saved her from her isolation had been Sarge. She remembered how he had taken her hand in his, led her into the venue, and danced with her in the middle of the hall.

It had been so fun that she had lost herself in the moment.

She would probably be able to dance with Sarge again today. That thought made her heart flutter. After they were finally finished getting ready, a maid led them to a waiting room.

The four fully-dressed princes were waiting there, each relaxing in his own way.

As soon as Prince Alexis's eyes fell on his wife, he rushed over to her side and took her hand.

Second Prince Est praised the three ladies on their appearances. His fiancée was the princess of another country, so today he was escorting a cousin from his mother's side. Julius, the guest of honor, was going over the day's proceedings with Marie. As expected, he also seemed to be feeling nervous.

Then there was Sarge, who was reading a book a little ways away from his brothers. Sensing the presence of other people, he raised his head. Once he saw Amelia, he shut his book and walked to her side.

"Amelia, that suits you very well. You look very pretty."

"Th-Thank...you..."

Hearing him praise her so straightforwardly made her look down in embarrassment.

Even she could clearly tell that she was blushing.

The maids who had helped her get ready had all told her several times how pretty she was, as had Sophia and Marie.

But when Sarge said it, it felt special. She couldn't calm herself down.

As each couple was talking to one another, Alexis looked around the room and said, "There will be several foreign emissaries visiting today, but since this is an engagement party, it will mainly be domestic nobles. However, the fact that there will be so many people means that it will be difficult to identify unfamiliar faces in the crowd. Take care not to wander off on your own."

At their brother's words, the other princes nodded seriously.

It was finally time for the party to begin.

The large hall that was being used as the venue for the celebration was extravagantly decorated.

In the air hung the aroma of the fresh flowers that decorated not only the tables but the walls and the floor. Several of those flowers did not grow in this kingdom or were growing out of season. They must have been the product of Sarge's research. There were sure to be people present who would take notice of that.

Most of the attendees had already gathered in the hall. Therein the four princes would enter hand in hand with their respective partners.

The first would be the guests of honor, Julius and Marie.

Next, Crown Prince Alexis and Crown Princess Sophia.

Following them would be Second Prince Est, and last would come Sarge and Amelia.

Come to think of it, this was Amelia's first time attending a party held at the royal castle, not to mention as Sarge's partner. Even if she could have told her past self about this, she would never have believed it would come to pass.

Est and his cousin entered the venue hand in hand, so it was finally Sarge and Amelia's turn next.

"Amelia, are you all right?"

At the sound of his voice, she raised her head to see that he was peering at her worriedly. She hadn't noticed, since her nerves were strained to the limit, but his appearance in formal dress was so dazzlingly beautiful that just the thought of walking by his side was enough to render her unable to breathe properly.

"I-I'm sorry. I'm just a little nervous."

In an attempt to pluck up her courage, she told herself it wouldn't do to be like this.

"You don't need to push yourself so much. All you need to do is be by my side," said Sarge kindly. Then he took Amelia's hand and stepped into the hall.

She felt countless stares on her. Everyone was staring at them with interest, wondering just whom the young lady being escorted by Sarge was.

Before long, a voice in the crowd said she was one of the students at the academy, the daughter of Count Lenia. When she heard that, Amelia steeled herself to hear them recount in amusement all the details about how Reese had run off with his unwavering true love, how they had just broken off their engagement, and how she had been isolated at school.

But instead, she only heard the crowd comment that any young lady who was acting as Sarge's assistant must be exceptional.

Her situation had been a big deal among the students, but matters such as dissolving engagements were commonplace among nobility. In fact, even Julius had just eliminated a potential fiancée from consideration and chosen a new one. What the people present focused on was Sarge's research, which amounted to carrying the future of the kingdom on his shoulders, and the excellence of Amelia, who was helping him.

Feeling as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders, she let out a huge sigh.

After the king gave his address, Julius announced his engagement to Marie. Each foreign emissary gave their congratulatory remarks, and then it was time for the main event's couple to dance.

Amelia watched the couple's graceful dance, and before she knew it, Sarge had put his arm around her shoulders.

"Shall we dance after my brother?"

"Yes, gladly."

She had never thought she'd get another chance to dance with him.

After Julius and Marie's dance ended, the orchestra started up another song. Sarge took Amelia's hand and led her into the middle of the hall.

On the day of the new student welcome party, Amelia had had so much fun dancing with all her heart and forgetting herself in the moment. However, today, she was strangely self-conscious about Sarge's arm around her back, so she wasn't able to dance well. In fact, she even fumbled a step and nearly fell, and Sarge had to hold her up.

"My apologies..."

"Don't worry about it. You're cute when you're nervous too."

"...Huh?!" she exclaimed in spite of herself, feeling as if he'd just said something preposterous without any hesitation.

But Sarge remained composed, as if nothing had happened.

Perhaps due to the shock, her tension relaxed a bit, and she was able to enjoy herself and dance afterwards.

Although Sarge was the only one of the four princes who had not officially decided on a fiancée, there was not a single young lady who tried to approach him.

And the reason for that was...

"Sarge, I was thinking that maybe our results have been skewed because we've been relying exclusively on data from the Lenia domain, so I requested that some data be sent from domains in the south, and they sent them. They naturally see less cold damage than the north, so the new grain hasn't yet come into wide use there."

"Oh? Show it to me later. If they have less cold-weather damage, then insect damage may be a more serious problem for them, so that's

not a bad choice. That said, I am curious to see if they've been experiencing lower temperatures each year even in the south."

"Yes, I was thinking that as well. That's why I also requested that they send records of the temperatures and weather they've experienced over the last five years."

"Good thinking. Right, about the water magic spells..."

No one approached them because the two kept having those sorts of conversations. No one was even able to interrupt them.

Sarge was the same as usual, but the onlookers would raise their voices in admiration at Amelia's intelligence; she wasn't merely keeping up with his conversation but occasionally leading with a suggestion.

But of course, Amelia didn't even notice the reaction of the crowd around them—she conversed with Sarge like she usually would.

The only ones to approach the pair were Amelia's family. She spoke with her parents and introduced Sarge to her uncle and her cousin Sol. Sarge also called over Kaid and Meena and introduced the latter to Sol. The two of them exchanged greetings and smiled at each other, making Amelia let out a sigh of relief that they seemed to get along relatively well.

With this, the Lenia family would be at peace.

Amelia danced with Sol for a change of pace and then made to return to the spot where Sarge was when she noticed her hair had suddenly come a bit loose.

"Oh my..."

Before returning to his side, she needed to get her appearance in order. She begged her cousin's pardon and then headed for the waiting room. Several of the maids who had helped her get ready were on standby there, so one of them was sure to be able to help her if she asked.

Thinking that, Amelia left the venue alone.

The wide corridor was devoid of people and so silent, you could have heard a pin drop.

That must have been because almost everyone was gathered inside the venue, and the maids were standing by in the waiting room.

A young noblewoman should never walk around alone, no matter how briefly. That was even more true for Amelia, who was attending the party as the fourth prince Sarge's partner.

However, she had often walked alone back home in the countryside. She had even mingled with the villeins and helped water the fields. For that reason, she gave little thought to walking around alone, assuming the castle would be safe.

"Oh?"

Suddenly noticing someone standing in the garden, Amelia came to a halt.

A young lady wearing a dress was looking around with a troubled expression. She looked as if she had dropped something important and was searching desperately for it. Without any hesitation, Amelia went into the garden and called out to the girl, "Do you require any help?"

"Ah...!" The girl gave a jolt and then tightly clasped her hands together. "I think I dropped my ring. It's my mother's heirloom, and it's very precious to me."

Amelia asked the girl, who was on the verge of tears, what her ring looked like, and then she also began searching the vicinity.

"I am terribly sorry. I'm making a complete stranger help me..."

"It's all right. It's something precious to you, isn't it?"

Amelia knew she needed to return quickly to the party, but she couldn't just ignore a girl in trouble. There were several guards around the perimeter of the garden. They also noticed the girls and came running over. After explaining that the two of them were looking for a lost ring, Amelia had the guards return to their posts.

They couldn't neglect their duty of guarding the castle, after all.

"Oh, could this be it?"

After searching for a while, Amelia picked up a ring that had fallen into a flower bed. It seemed the girl had dropped it quite a ways away from where Amelia had first encountered her.

She raised her head and was about to call out to the girl when someone suddenly called out to her from behind.

"Pardon me, but it seems your hair ornament has fallen."

"Huh?"

She turned around to see one of the guards bending down to pick something up.

When she looked, she saw it was the yellow sapphire hair ornament she had been wearing. She couldn't believe that while she had picked up the girl's ring, she had in turn dropped her own hair ornament. With a wry smile, she accepted the ornament from the guard.

"Thank you," she said.

Her loosened hair had now come completely undone. She needed to bring the ring back to the girl quickly and then return to Sarge's side.

"If you're looking for the young lady from earlier, I believe she was heading for the back gate," said the guard who had picked up her hair ornament. Amelia walked in that direction so she could return the girl's ring.

Just as she was about to call out to the girl, who was walking around looking as if she was at her wit's end, Amelia was suddenly

grabbed by the arm and pulled into the shadow of a building.

“...Ngh!”

It was the guard who had just picked up her hair ornament.

She was about to demand to know what he thought he was doing when she realized who he was. “It can’t be... Reese?”

She’d thought the guard’s voice had sounded familiar.

His hair color was different, but there was no way she could mistake the figure that she had known since childhood.

“What are you doing here?!”

He had tried to incriminate Amelia, had been exposed by Sarge, and had then run off with his girlfriend Sarah. Why was he here at the royal castle disguised as a guard?

“I came to get you.”

“...To get me?” she echoed, not understanding what he was saying one bit. “What about your girlfriend? The one you went so far as to run off with in the name of your unwavering true love?”

“Sarah and I broke up shortly after that. After she heard that I wouldn’t be able to use magic and would have to become a commoner, she said she was going back home and ran off.”

“You...” Amelia was at a loss for words. So that was the conclusion of the true love that had caused such an uproar at the academy and done so much harm to Amelia? Sarah had already returned to her home, but the Carias must have been keeping that a secret. “So you were dumped and now you’re coming back to me? What makes you think you can even do that?”

“Amelia, you’ve always been exceptional. I couldn’t beat you, no matter how hard I tried. I’ve always been jealous of you because of that.”

She shot him a glare that said, *Stop joking around*. Reese averted his gaze and said, in a quiet voice, “After entering the academy, I became more and more aware of how brilliant you are. If I’d married you the way I was, I would always have been compared to you for the rest of my life. I couldn’t stand that thought.”

Reese went on to explain that since Amelia would be entering the academy the following year, he had known that the number of people who would be praising her would only grow larger. With that thought in mind, Reese had spread that terrible rumor and tried to diminish Amelia’s worth.

He was so selfish.

Amelia had had to suffer through all that without even knowing the reason why.

Reese himself had also probably been suffering from his envious feelings towards Amelia for a long time. And of course Amelia had had no idea of that.

Still, his behavior was inexcusable.

Every time she looked at Reese, she remembered the painful feelings from that time. It must have been the same for him. That was why it would have been best for the two of them never to meet again.

“Why did you even come to see me at this point? Our engagement is already over and done with. And you were even expelled from the academy.”

It didn't matter that he was a user of valuable earth magic; those who did not graduate from the academy were not permitted to use magic. Magic was a powerful ability that was reserved for nobles. That was why the children of nobles had a duty to enroll in the academy and be tested on whether they were able to use that power responsibly.

Under normal circumstances, after the official procedures of expulsion, Reese would have had a magic-sealing bracelet placed on him.

“That's why I came back for you. Come with me to the Beltz Empire. They're in desperate need of earth and water magic users right now. I've been promised that if I go there with you, I'll be granted a peerage, since you can use water magic. Let's start over, the two of us. I'll make sure to cherish you this time.”

At the mention of the Beltz Empire, Amelia shuddered.

In the southern part of the continent lay a mountain range, on the other side of which was the vast empire. The empire didn't have much interaction with the surrounding countries, so detailed information about it was shrouded in mystery.

Although it had a strong military and extensive territory, it was said that magic barely existed within the empire. That was why, in their desire for magical power, they had tried to get involved in third prince Julius's marriage decision and had tried to abduct Sarge as a child ten years ago.

Amelia remembered Alexis's earlier warning that agents of the Beltz Empire might be infiltrating the party.

Had Reese joined hands with that very empire?

“...What makes you think I'd go with you?”

“I doubt you have a new marriage proposal, given how much your bad reputation has spread. That's why you're throwing yourself into your studies and aiming to become a magical researcher, right? I feel bad about that. If you came with me to the empire, I could give you a comfortable life in which you'd want for nothing. So...”

“I am *not* going to the empire with you,” Amelia cut him off in a flat tone. “It's true a lot has happened, but I'm actually really happy right now. Did you really think I'd be glad to see you come back and tell me to run away with you at this point?”

Plus, the Beltz Empire was an enemy that had tried to kidnap Sarge when he was a child. There was absolutely no way she would side with anyone who was a danger to him.

“Amelia, I...”

“That’s enough. Step away from Amelia,” came an abrupt voice.

She turned around to see that at some point a group of guards had surrounded them.

Amidst them was Sarge, wearing a hardened expression.

“Sarge!”

Amelia tried to run to his side, but Reese seized hold of her arm.

“Amelia, I...”

“Enough already!”

Amelia turned around and pulled herself free of his grasp. Then she slapped him across the cheek as hard as she could. Without even sparing a glance back at Reese, who had fallen down from the momentum of the slap, Amelia ran to Sarge’s side.

“Sarge...”

“I’m glad you’re safe.”

He embraced her tightly; the warmth of his arms wrapped around her back finally gave her a sense of relief.

“He’s in contact with the Beltz Empire. He said he was going to take me there.”

As soon as she said that, the guards around them began to seethe with anger.

Amelia’s slap had left Reese in a daze, and the guards quickly took him away. He was going to be handed over to the knights immediately.

Amelia heard someone sobbing and looked to see the young lady who had been searching for her ring looking over at them and crying. It seemed she had noticed something was off and had called over the guards.

“I’m sorry. This is all my fault...”

“Not at all. Thank you. And I found your ring,” Amelia said, handing it over.

The girl expressed her thanks over and over, bowing her head. After she left, Amelia breathed a sigh of relief, and Sarge embraced her again.

“Is your hand all right?”

“...Yes. I was able to finish what I left undone the other day, so I feel a bit refreshed.”

Amelia had thought about slapping Reese when he had ambushed her at the library. Now, she had finally managed to do it.

“I see. I also wanted to hit him, if I could.”

“Huh? *You* did?”

She couldn't even imagine him doing that.

Her eyes widened in surprise, and Sarge gently stroked her black hair.

"That's right. He was trying to steal you away from me, after all."

Amelia didn't respond—she felt as if she had just heard something unbelievable.

Calm down now, she told herself.

Surely Sarge was just angry that Reese had been about to take away his assistant, who was indispensable to his research.

She couldn't read too much into it.

"Um..."

"Oh, your hair has come undone. Shall we go back inside?"

"Y-Yes."

If they stayed in this place, surrounded by guards, someone might wonder what was going on. Today was Julius and Marie's engagement party, after all. They couldn't allow this issue with Reese to put a damper on it.

For some reason, Sarge brought Amelia not to the waiting room but to the guest room she had been making frequent use of. The serene maid she had become familiar with quickly fixed her hair and brewed her some tea to help calm her down. Throughout that process, Sarge sat a little bit away from Amelia and silently watched her. She felt puzzled by an apparent fire in his eyes that had never been there before.

"Um, I'm very terribly sorry for causing you trouble like this."

"That's right. Don't walk around alone anymore."

Being chastised lightly like that made Amelia drop her shoulders in resignation.

"I always used to roam around my family's domain alone. I suppose I haven't gotten rid of that habit..."

"Alone?"

"Yes, because I would help with watering the fields and such."

"If I were alone, I could probably experiment and collect everything I need without any limitations. Especially when it comes to examining soil, one day's worth of data doesn't mean much. Plus..."

"You mustn't do that. It's too dangerous."

It was likely that other agents of the empire besides Reese had snuck into the country. She hurriedly warned him so. He definitely seemed like the type who would wander around on his own.

"Could you tell me what Reese said to you?" he asked.

Amelia straightened her posture and told him everything.

"Yes. He said that if he brought me to the Beltz Empire, they would grant him a peerage. It seems they want earth and water magic users at any cost."

“...Earth and water? Was that rumor true, then?”

Apparently, their schemes had been a matter of rumor for some time already.

“If he’s told the empire about you, we’ll need to get you a bodyguard.”

“What? No, I really don’t need something like that.”

Water magic was not particularly rare in this country. The only reason Reese had come to her specifically was because she was his ex-fiancée. Furthermore, as Sarge’s assistant, Amelia spent most of her time by his side. And Sarge had his own knight bodyguard, Kaid, so there was no need for her to have one too.

She raised those points frantically, and Sarge looked like he was giving them some thought.

“If you never leave my side, I suppose you don’t need a personal bodyguard.”

“R-Right. I won’t ever leave your side.”

Amelia nodded vigorously, thinking it would be discourteous to have her own bodyguard.

“In that case, you should live here starting today. Anyone can enter the academy dorms, so it’s much too dangerous.”

“Huh?!”

“Then, since we’ll be going to and from school together, we won’t need separate guards.”

“...Together?”

“I’ll have someone move your things out of your dorm and bring them here.”

“My things...”

He’d decided on everything so quickly. Now he took her hand, saying everyone would be worried and that the two of them should go back. With Amelia still not fully understanding the situation, they returned to the hall.

Since she had been gone for a while, her parents and her cousin had been worried.

But Sarge let them know that she had been helping a young lady find her lost ring, and with a sigh of relief, they laughed and said that that was very like Amelia.

But it really was careless of me to walk around alone. I need to be careful.

They didn’t tell anyone about what had happened with Reese.

Afterwards, the party ended without further incident, and, after she’d promised her parents she would return home for the summer holidays, they parted ways.

With her duty complete, Amelia should have been returning straight to her dorm. But just as Sarge had said, she was given a room

in the castle and would be living there from now on. When she returned to that room to change, she found that at some point all her belongings from her dorm had been placed there.

Her unease grew a bit when she contemplated the incredible swiftness with which that plan had been implemented. It was possible the situation was graver than Amelia had thought.

If she was being targeted like Sarge feared, then wouldn't staying by his side at all times expose him to *more* danger?

"Lady Amelia," someone suddenly called out to her. She looked up to see the familiar maid peering into her room. "Prince Sarge is calling for you."

"I'll be right there."

He probably wanted to speak to her about what would come next. With that in mind, she quickly got herself ready and hurried to where he was. She was led to the same reception room where she had met with the four princes before.

In the room were the crown prince and princess, Second Prince Est, Julius and Marie, and Sarge and his knight guard, Kaid.

Everyone was present, meaning Amelia was the last to arrive. She apologized for being late, and then she was guided to sit in the seat next to Sarge.

Sarge explained what had happened to Amelia, and everyone openly expressed their indignation.

"Where did Reese get in contact with a subordinate of the empire?"

In response to Alexis's question, Sarge told him that the knights were currently investigating that matter. If what Reese had said was true, the Caria family was currently harboring their daughter at their estate. That would need to be investigated as well.

"At any rate, earth and water magic, huh? So the rumors that the empire's territory is undergoing desertification are true, then?" muttered Julius, his arms crossed.

"Did you say...desert?" asked Amelia.

Julius nodded and replied, "That's right. At the same time we're having problems with cold-weather damage, the empire has been experiencing less rainfall, apparently making desertification a problem for them."

On top of that, there were hardly any people who could use magic in the empire. Since they didn't have a way to solve the problem, they must have been growing panicked.

"Even if that's the case, they would have been better off asking for aid, not attempting to abduct people. That country hasn't changed one bit in the last ten years," said Julius, unable to hide his irritation. Alexis and Est also nodded.

Sarge, however, only muttered, “A desert, huh? I’ve never seen one before,” making his brothers look at him in astonishment. “Have you seen one, Amelia?”

“No, I haven’t. From what I have heard, it’s a dry land where rain doesn’t fall and vegetation doesn’t grow.”

“Vegetation that is resilient to aridity... No, rather, maybe afforestation would be more effective...”

As Sarge expressed his interest in the desert, imploring gazes converged on Amelia.

Amelia herself also held some interest in the desert, but she felt it would be better not to admit that at the moment.

“Sarge, before vegetation that’s resilient to aridity, we first need to develop that new water magic.”

“Ah, right. That comes first.”

Everyone let out sighs of relief as Sarge nodded and agreed with what Amelia had said.

“Amelia, look after Sarge. Ten years ago, he was lured away by someone saying they would show him a plant that grew only in the empire,” Alexis said, apparently exasperated that Sarge hadn’t changed at all since then.

“A plant that only grows in the empire?”

Amelia had unintentionally leaned forward in curiosity, and Julius said something awfully familiar in exasperation. “Ah, no good. You’re one of them, after all.”

“Kaid, it’s up to you to look after these two.”

“...I feel as if my burden is incomparably greater than those of other knights.”

While Kaid was slowly crumpling to the floor, Alexis and Julius spoke in succession.

“Give it up.”

“Your younger sister is set to marry into the Lenia family. So you’re basically family now, right?”

“I was so happy thinking my sister had received a good marriage proposal, but I can’t believe she’s being used as a hostage...”

Kaid sank pathetically to his knees, secretly resolving that he would soon be the one to give out orders.

No one opposed Sarge’s declaration that, for her own safety, Amelia should be allowed to live in the royal castle, and so the matter was decided unanimously. Amelia had thought the king’s permission would be necessary as well, but apparently he had already granted it some time ago.

Sophia was delighted, and Marie quietly muttered, “She’s finally been caught.”

Thus, Amelia lived in the castle and spent her days with Sarge.

Every evening she would sleep in the same guest room at the castle, and in the morning she would have breakfast with the four princes and the crown princess and then head to the academy with Sarge.

So began her new way of life.

Fortunately, she had now visited the castle many times, so she had gotten a bit used to it already.

The maid she'd become acquainted with now took care to make her living situation comfortable, and even Sophia told Amelia to come to her if she was having any issues.

The only thing was, her school life had also changed a bit.

Up until that point, she would spend her mornings preparing for the exam in a private study room. But in order to not leave Sarge's side, she had started going straight to the library every morning as well. They spent their whole school day together and even returned to the castle in the same carriage.

She was being treated as if she really were his fiancée.

She felt she was being discourteous, so she thought she should at least do her own thing in the mornings. But if she did that, Sarge would tell her she needed a guard, so she really was unsure of what to do.

"It really is dangerous, so isn't it better just to stay by Prince Sarge's side as you're being asked to do?" said Marie.

Reese had been in contact with the imperials, but he apparently still wasn't telling the knights many concrete details, and they hadn't been able to get much information out of him.

Even though he was a rare earth mage, his intelligence and talents were middling, so perhaps he was being used as a pawn.

There were those saying that maybe what the empire was really after was Amelia, who was a talented water mage with abundant knowledge.

I don't think I'm worth that much, though...

However, others said it was possible that Amelia was being used to lure Sarge. Hearing that, she felt she could not do anything reckless whatsoever.

Even among other knights, Kaid excelled at swordsmanship, and he could use fire as a magic swordsman. Even alone, he would be able to protect both Sarge and Amelia. That was precisely why, although the two of them gave him a lot of trouble, Amelia was confident that as long as they were by his side, they would be safe.

Reese had been formally expelled from the Royal Academy of Magic and had also apparently been affixed with a magic-sealing bracelet. He was still being detained by the knights and was unlikely

to be released anytime soon.

Just as he'd testified, Sarah had run back home to her family. Just like Reese, she had been expelled and affixed with a magic-sealing bracelet. However, since she wasn't in communication with the empire, she wouldn't be punished any further than that.

Nonetheless, a noble who could not use magic would find it hard to get married. The only other paths remaining to her were to become a nun or a commoner.

While Amelia thought that was unfortunate, a powerful ability like magic could not be used to oppress others.

Since Sarah was still young enough to mend her ways, Amelia hoped she could start anew.

Right now, the kingdom was in the middle of a detailed examination into just how far agents of the empire had infiltrated. Apparently Julius and others were using reenactment magic to investigate thoroughly, so it appeared the infiltrators would be eliminated before long.

Security was being strengthened to ensure they could not infiltrate the kingdom again. However, preventing that completely would likely be difficult. The kingdom would have to continue conducting periodic investigations from here on out.

Chapter 5: For the Sake of a Happy Future

While the internal affairs of the kingdom were hectic, the academy remained tranquil.

Amelia continued her studies in silent determination and passed the exam for the Special A class with the top score. Of course, Marie passed as well.

All of ten people had been chosen for the Special A class. Considering that around fifty people had taken the examination, it must have been quite challenging.

From now on, they would be studying at the magic research laboratory that had been newly established next to the academy.

Just like the castle library, the laboratory contained a plethora of books and top-notch facilities. There would be not only those chosen for the Special A class but also established researchers.

Those people would undoubtedly be the elites of magical research.

They would all be people rich in knowledge and experience who possessed proven skills. There were also those who acted arrogantly, but for the most part they were caring people who enjoyed teaching students.

It was the perfect environment in which to study magic.

On the first day, the researchers and students all introduced themselves and then announced their individual research goals and discussed their knowledge and experiences. When Amelia said her goal was to develop a new form of water magic, the researchers looked doubtful.

Developing new magic was difficult even for experienced researchers. Although she was the top student of the Special A class, she was still just a student, so there were a few people who laughed at her words, saying she was being foolhardy.

But after finding out that she was developing the magic with Sarge, and that she was his assistant, everyone changed their tune completely. Even the researchers knew that if Sarge was working on it, it would be possible.

The passionate honor students of the Special A class and the magic researchers alike were dedicating their all to magical research, whether through the occasional heated debate or, more often, through cooperating with each other.

Naturally, many people flocked to Sarge. All those who wanted to perfect their magic begged Sarge to teach them, likely hoping they would learn something from their conversations with him.

However, Amelia was a little concerned.

Sarge listened to everyone intently, his calm demeanor never wavering.

It was as if he had reverted to who he was when they'd first met.

When they'd first become acquainted, Sarge had always taken care not to drop his gentle smile so as not to let his handsome features give off a cold impression. Then, as they grew closer, he had begun to express his honest feelings in front of Amelia.

His scarily serious face as he was immersed in his research.

His happy expression when he received a result he wanted.

His cold severity when he was confronted with someone he disliked.

She'd even seen his sleepy, squinting eyes as they rode the carriage to school together after an all-nighter.

Having become more familiar with his moods, she felt certain that Sarge was pushing himself now, and it made her uneasy.

She was also concerned by the fact that, every day after they returned to the castle, the amount of time he spent shut up in the castle library was getting longer.

Sarge had always done research alone. Perhaps he found it too difficult to concentrate in a noisy lab filled with people. Not to mention, there were so many people who wanted to talk with him. Perhaps that was why he would do his own research after returning to the castle.

Amelia also helped Sarge until dinnertime, but she couldn't stay with him for long afterwards. It had been fine when she'd been coming and going from the castle, but now that they were living there together, she couldn't remain by his side late into the night, even in the library.

After transferring to the lab, Sarge had skipped breakfast on more than one occasion.

"Amelia, got something on your mind?"

Amelia was waiting for Sarge in front of the carriage they would take to school together when Julius called out to her.

That morning, Sarge had once again failed to appear for breakfast. He seemed to have once again stayed in the library late into the night.

Julius would be graduating from the academy in just under half a year, so he was not affiliated with the lab. Since he could use reenactment magic, he had been assisting in investigating the empire's movements by visiting various places.

But now things seemed to be calming down, so Amelia and Julius

were running into each other in the castle more often.

“...I’m actually worried about Sarge.” Amelia confided everything to Julius.

“Ah, I see.” After hearing what she had to say, Julius nodded deeply. “I’ve been so busy recently that I haven’t been paying attention to him. It’s helpful that you’ve been watching out for him. Thank you.”

“N-Not at all. I rather thought I was being meddlesome.”

“I wouldn’t say that at all. I don’t have your brainpower, so I can’t help Sarge with his research, but I can help change his environment. I’ll take care of things at the lab, so you just take care of Sarge.”

“...Understood.”

She couldn’t tell him it was a lot of responsibility for her. She just nodded seriously.

After she consulted with Julius about what to do next, he took off first.

Amelia waited for Sarge to arrive, and then they headed to the academy together.

Sarge had shown up later than usual, and he was gazing out at the landscape with a dazed expression. It was a face he would only make in front of his family and Amelia. Amelia watched over him in silence; she didn’t dare say a word.

As soon as the carriage arrived at the academy, she executed the plan she had thought up. Kaid the knight escort had come to greet them and was waiting in the area where the carriage had parked. Amelia yelled to him, “I’m so sorry, Sir Kaid!”

“Wha—? Wait! Hey, wait!”

As soon as they descended from the carriage, Amelia grabbed Sarge’s hand and dashed away.

Their pursuer was a trained knight, so she knew he would quickly catch up to them.

But she was equally sure Julius would do something to help. She had already consulted with him and received his blessing.

As long as Kaid was with them, then no matter how much she told Sarge to rest, he would not do so. The only people he felt he could let his guard down around were his family and Amelia. She knew she had done something mean to Kaid, but she was sure Julius would patch things up for them this time.

Instead of the laboratory, Amelia headed for the academy, taking refuge in an empty private study room.

“Amelia, what are you doing?”

Sarge had let himself be dragged along without any sort of protest, but now that he had been shut into a room, he finally asked that.

“You seemed tired, so I thought maybe today we could take a break.”

If he had just taken a normal day off, there would have been no need to come to the academy. But knowing Sarge, even if he were absent from school, he would likely still spend the whole day locked in the castle library.

That wouldn't have been a break at all, which was why she had brought him to this empty room.

“I don't remember making a tired face.”

Sarge looked troubled, but then he laughed.

Amelia nodded, saying that was natural. “I'm positive no one noticed...besides me.”

“Besides you?”

“Yes. We're always together, so I could tell.”

“I see.”

Sarge nodded, his expression a mixture of happiness and reluctance to admit that fact.

“In any case, please sit down and rest a bit,” she said, ushering him into a chair. It was a small room, so there was only one desk and one chair.

“And what about you?”

“I'm fine with the floor.” As she said that, she sat right down on the floor. She knew if she remained standing, he wouldn't rest.

Sitting directly on the floor was improper behavior, but back when she was inspecting the crops, Amelia had often gone so far as to plant herself on the bare earth.

In any case, her only thought had been that she wanted Sarge to relax, but Sarge settled into a refined position next to her on the floor of all places.

“Sarge?”

She made to stand up and to tell him he couldn't do something like that, but then Sarge leaned against her shoulder.

“Ah!”

His soft hair brushed against her cheek, startling her.

She had always hoped to be able to support him, to help him. But that had only been in regard to his research; she'd never thought she would be allowed to step into his private life.

But now Sarge was leaning against her gently, his eyes closed.

“I think you're right. I am tired. The lab is a bit noisy.”

“...Yes, it is.”

Everyone there was passionate about magic to the point of devoting their lives to it. There were those who were simply interested in magic, as well as those who held a desire to accomplish something. It was a place where all kinds of people gathered. If they worked

together, they would be able to improve upon each other's ideas.

The magic laboratory was itself a splendid thing. This kingdom's magic would continue to progress. For this continent, which was at the mercy of the weather, it could really become a beacon of hope.

But Sarge's nature meant that he tended to prefer thinking alone. What he needed was not the opinions of others but a quiet place to work.

"I don't need any top-notch facilities or piles of books. All I need is you."

Those were his true feelings—he was able to express them freely now that it was just the two of them alone in this room.

He depended on her.

A feeling of happiness spread gradually through Amelia's chest.

"If you say something like that, you're going to give me the wrong idea," she said, trying to conceal her happiness and embarrassment.

But then Sarge shifted his body and fixed Amelia with an unexpectedly serious look.

"Sarge?"

"I want you by my side, always. Even if you said you wanted to leave, I wouldn't be able to grant you that wish."

"Do you mean...as your assistant?"

Her voice trembled in an unbecoming fashion as she asked that. She had thought she would be fine with that, but when she looked into his eyes, which were so filled with ardor, she ended up hoping for something more. "If that's what you want, that's fine too."

"...And if it's not?"

Would she be allowed to wish for a stronger bond than that of an assistant?

When she'd entered the academy, she'd been isolated and suffering, and the first one to offer her a hand had been Sarge.

She'd held him and his research in high regard.

But before she even knew it, her feelings for the person who'd saved her from her suffering had grown into something more.

She clutched her hands tightly together, waiting for his words. He smiled at her warmly.

"At first, I just wanted to help you out of the bind you seemed to be in. That's why I called out to you. Then I found out you were the daughter of Count Lenia, and you turned out to be knowledgeable about magic and crops, so I thought we could become friends. I very much enjoyed being able to talk about magic with you, instead of just researching. But I'm sure you remember hearing that all my assistants grow tired of me?"

"Yes," Amelia said, nodding.

They had spoken about that when Amelia had gone to the castle

to inquire about the recommendation letter.

“You told me before that you were happy to help me and that it was fun for you to talk about magic with me. That was the first time anyone had ever said that to me. It was at that moment that I realized it—I was falling for you.”

Softly, he grabbed hold of her hand.

Even though they had just been holding hands as they ran together, the warmth his hands gave her now almost brought tears to her eyes.

“Unlike my brothers Est and Julius, I’ll have to remain a member of the royal family. Amelia, would you become the wife of royalty?”

After Est and Julius got married, they would become dukes—subjects rather than royalty. Amelia knew that.

But Sarge was the son of the queen. Even when Alexis succeeded to the throne, he would remain in the royal family as the king’s brother and continue his magical and botanical research for the sake of the kingdom.

Her readiness to become Sarge’s wife. The wife of royalty.

There were things that love alone could not overcome.

“But, my status and achievements are...”

She was the daughter of a country noble, and now she was no longer even in the line of succession. She was still a student and hadn’t any accomplishments to speak of; she had just been working as Sarge’s assistant.

In response to Amelia’s uneasy expression, Sarge said, “If you can develop new water magic, that will be enough of an accomplishment. If you can do that, no one will ever bring up something like your status.”

“Water magic? But that’s your...”

Developing new water magic was part of his research—Amelia was just helping him.

“I originally thought of it as a pretext to obstruct your engagement. I can use earth magic, but I’ve got the wrong affinity.”

“That’s not...” Amelia shook her head.

Did he not understand his own worth?

He could use the highly esteemed and rare light magic, which was even more precious than earth magic; he was researching botany and putting all his effort into solving the kingdom’s food situation.

His knowledge and precious magic were wanted by not just the kingdom but even the empire.

Even Amelia’s father had strongly wanted her to marry an earth mage and had been relentless in saying any boy would do as long as he could use earth magic.

Even knowing that, Sarge had thought they should raise the

perceived worth of water magic and make Amelia herself the lord of the domain.

Women rarely inherited peerage titles.

But still, it was not as if it never happened—for example, when there were no other successors.

However, developing new water magic was taking more time than he had anticipated. And so, after finding out that Amelia's cousin could inherit the Lenia domain, Sarge had tried to find Sol a fiancée whom Amelia's father would approve of.

The fact that there was a female earth magic user so close by, and that she was also on board with the idea, had been a stroke of good luck.

And then he had continued his work developing new water magic in order to raise Amelia's worth. It was true that if they were successful in creating such effective magic, she would be considered a suitable partner for Sarge.

But, if Amelia's father had known that Sarge was interested in his daughter, he wouldn't have looked for a new fiancé for her.

Sarge had only had to say the word.

Instead, he'd done everything on his own.

All for Amelia's sake.

What should I do...? I...

Unable to look him squarely in the face, Amelia covered her own—which was undoubtedly bright red—and looked away.

She had been aware of how much he had done for her, but she had thought that was because she was his friend and because he didn't want to lose a useful assistant.

But the reason Sarge had done all those things was not out of a feeling of friendship but his love for Amelia. That made her so happy that she nearly felt tears prickle her eyes, but she still couldn't quite believe it.

I just thought it was all one sided...

Amelia was also falling for him.

He had saved her so many times, there was no possibility that she wouldn't.

The one who always extended a hand to her was Sarge.

She gently turned her gaze back to him. His eyes, full of heartrending intensity, were fixed solely on her.

She was the only one he would look at this way.

As that thought came to her, she felt her heart filled with a sense of elation beyond compare.

Words of adoration fell easily from her lips.

"I love you. I've loved you ever since we first met."

At the time, she hadn't known his name or his status. And she had

not even realized her own feelings until much later. But each time he had saved her from the despair of losing her trust in people, her feelings had grown stronger and stronger.

She raised her head and said clearly, "I'll work hard on developing water magic. In order to stay by your side, I will leave my mark, not as your assistant, but as a collaborator."

They were words of resolution—a vow.

"That's right. Let's work hard together. From now on, we'll always be together."

As if in proof of their vow, Sarge placed a kiss on the back of her hand.

That was enough to make Amelia turn bright red and look down. Sarge looked at her affectionately.

"Oh, but we're supposed to be resting today, right?"

"Yes. Today is your day off." She nodded vigorously, remembering her original plan.

When she'd taken his hand and run away, she had never imagined things would turn out this way.

"In that case, allow me to rest just a little," he said, returning to his earlier position reclining against Amelia's shoulder.

Amelia gasped, remembering that they were still sitting on the floor. "Wha— Surely you're not going to...here..."

She couldn't possibly let him rest on the floor like this. However, in no time at all, Sarge fell asleep.

He really must have been pushing himself recently.

Oh, what do I do?

She wanted him to rest easily.

But she was unsure if she should let him rest in a place like this.

There was no other choice but for her to stay put in that position until eventually Julius came to find them during the afternoon break.

"Ah, sorry. Your shoulders must be stiff."

The one who was apologizing wasn't Sarge but Julius. He was carrying the still-sleeping Sarge to the infirmary. When they were finally able to lay him down on a bed to sleep, Amelia let out a sigh of relief.

"Once he's out, there's no waking him. Since he hasn't been sleeping well lately, let's let him sleep here until the end of the school day." After saying that, Julius took a look around the infirmary with a nostalgic smile. "The first time I met you was when you came to the infirmary, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I had twisted my ankle. Thank you for casting healing magic on me then," she said.

"Don't worry about it. That was Sarge's fault, after all."

"No, it wasn't. It was actually my fault." She hurriedly told him

what had really happened that day—she had been the one who had run into Sarge and injured him.

“Oh, really? If Kaid had been his guard back then, neither of you would have gotten hurt.”

“...I did something inexcusable to Sir Kaid today.”

It must have been utterly baffling for him to have both of his charges suddenly run off like that.

“It’s fine—I’ve already apologized to him. I’ll call for him and have him watch over Sarge until the end of the day.”

After entrusting Sarge to Kaid, Amelia returned to the laboratory with Julius.

Before departing the infirmary, Amelia had also apologized directly to Kaid for running away from him. He had given her a slightly embarrassed smile and told her it was fine.

“Oh, right. From today, I’ll be taking charge of the lab,” said Julius.

Since he would soon be graduating, he had not taken the Special A class examination.

“You will?”

“Yeah, Sarge should do as he likes. He can come to the lab or he can go to the academy library as he used to do.”

Seeing as Sarge was still a student, it seemed Julius wanted him to be either at the academy or the laboratory. After Julius graduated, he would be made the director of the laboratory.

Apparently, that position had originally been intended for Sarge, but Julius had nominated himself for the role, since it would have meant placing too great a burden on his younger brother.

We just talked about Sarge this morning, and only half a day has passed...

She was surprised by how quickly Julius moved, but he must have made the arrangements for that right away; he was always doting on his younger brother.

The members of the royal family, who had the incredibly rare power of light magic, seemed as remote as gods. And yet, if one were to get close to them, it would become clear that they were charming brothers who got along well as a family.

“You really cherish Sarge, don’t you?”

“Well, of course, but he’s not the only one I cherish. I cherish my whole family. And I already think of you and Marie as my family too.”

Amelia wasn’t sure how much of the situation Julius was aware of.

But she felt that he had prepared an environment in which she and Sarge could focus on developing water magic.

“Thank you very much. I’ll do my absolute best,” she said.

Julius gave her a gentle pat on the head. Amelia didn't have any siblings, but his hand felt like that of a kind older brother.

Starting the next day, Julius began coming to the magic laboratory.

The lab was as boisterous as ever, but Julius had always enjoyed talking with people. Since he was also a considerate, helpful individual, he quickly came to be surrounded by a crowd of people.

Sarge didn't stay confined in the academy library at all times; he would occasionally make his way to the lab as well now that Julius was there.

It wasn't as if Sarge disliked people—it was just that he was the type to get immersed in his own research. Amelia also accompanied Sarge in his coming and going between the lab and library.

Amelia took the lead in their water magic research.

It was certainly a lot of responsibility, but Sarge was by her side, watching over her, and Julius was also available for consultation as a water magic specialist.

Since theory alone could only have gotten her so far, Amelia was planning to return home for the summer holiday and try out some experiments there. She had promised her parents she would come, after all, and she wanted to see with her own eyes how the crops were growing.

However, security would be a problem.

She broached the topic. “Um, Sarge? I'm thinking of returning home for the summer...”

Sarge put down the book he'd been reading and turned to look at Amelia. “To the Lenia domain?”

“Yes. I'm curious about the growth of the grains, and I also told my parents I would go home.”

“I see. In that case, I'll accompany you.”

“Oh?”

“I'd like to see for myself how the new grain variety is growing.”

As a member of the royal family, Sarge rarely left the capital, and he had apparently never seen a wide expanse of farmland.

Certainly, as a researcher, there would be a lot he could gain from seeing things in person.

But if he ended up accompanying her, security would become an even bigger issue.

And so they discussed having Kaid accompany them as well. Apparently his younger sister Meena had also been saying she wanted to see the Lenia domain. For her, it was the land she would be marrying into. It was natural she would be curious as to what kind of place it was. And so Amelia's cousin would also be visiting in order to

show her around.

“Quite a number of people will be going, but having Sir Kaid come along with us will give us some peace of mind, won’t it?”

The moment she thought they were wrapping up their plans, Julius said that he would go as well, since he would worry if Sarge were to go off on his own.

Julius himself would be inspecting a certain domain during the summer holiday, one that was apparently not too far away from the Lenia domain.

“Um, Amelia, I would also like to...”

That wasn’t all—even Marie, who had always yearned to visit a friend’s domain during summer, asked if she could please come along. Marie didn’t have many close friends, and seeing her classmates receive invitations to each other’s domains last year had left her feeling a bit envious.

In sum, there would be two members of the royal family and two daughters of counts going home with Amelia, along with their knight escort Kaid and Amelia’s cousin Sol.

Amelia sighed, thinking about the fuss her parents were going to make at the lord’s residence.

Her mother aside, her father had put her through quite a lot, so she felt it was all right to trouble him just a bit.

Naturally, Kaid would not be the only guard traveling with them; Julius’s guards would be accompanying him as well. Amelia’s family was also planning to send an escort from the Lenia domain to meet them, so Kaid’s burden would be lessened some.

The one problem was that Amelia wasn’t completely confident that Sarge would behave himself when presented with extensive farmland before his eyes.

She, at least, would make sure not to wander off on her own.

A carriage ride to the Lenia domain, situated in the northern part of the kingdom, would take a couple days. At the halfway point, they would have to stay in a town for one night, and making those arrangements seemed like it would take some effort.

She’d thought she would simply be going back home for the summer holiday, but as it turned into a bigger and bigger to-do, Amelia grew increasingly worried.

However, she could tell just how excited Sarge was for their journey. If he was looking forward to it that much, then she was willing to do her best for him.

She went over the route to the Lenia domain with Kaid many times. Since the agents of the empire who had infiltrated the kingdom had just recently been dealt with to the last man, there was unlikely to be danger in that regard.

Timing-wise, it was probably the best time to go.

Although the Lenia domain was in the countryside, sentries routinely patrolled the area, so no bandit groups had settled around there. And since her mother committed herself to the social welfare of their domain, there weren't any orphans who had been turned out into the streets.

Kaid seemed relieved that his little sister would be marrying into a peaceful domain.

With their careful preparations complete, their group departed for the Lenia domain the next day—the start of the summer holiday. Kaid's sister and Amelia's cousin, who were not students, had set out first.

Thus, they boarded their carriages—Amelia with Sarge and Julius with Marie—and departed the royal capital.

Their journey went peacefully, and when evening came, they safely arrived at the village they had made plans to stay the night in. The next morning, Julius would be parting ways with them and heading to the domain he planned to investigate.

It was only when Sarge told her that she learned the place Julius was visiting was the Thurma domain, the home of her ex-fiancé Reese's parents.

"Reese's..."

If the matter had just been the commotion caused by the dissolution of their son's engagement and his subsequent removal from the line of succession and expulsion from the academy, they might have settled things by repaying their financial aid to the academy and compensating Amelia's family. Even saddled with some debt, they would have been able to pick themselves back up somehow.

However, Reese's involvement with the empire had proven fatal to them.

Since not all of the facts had come to light yet, his punishment was still undecided, but it was possible he would be imprisoned. And if Reese's plan was judged to be malicious and he was accused of treason, he wouldn't be the only one punished.

Accordingly, Marquis Thurma had decided to relinquish his title and his land to the kingdom. If he gave up everything willingly, rather than having it taken from him, the Thurmas wouldn't be punished any further.

I suppose I shouldn't say "thank goodness" or anything like that.

She felt some relief that the blame for the wrongdoing had fallen solely upon Reese.

She didn't hold any sympathy for him. Considering the poor treatment she had had to endure, he really had brought it on himself.

But...

If Amelia had been nothing more than the daughter of a count, this likely wouldn't have become such a serious incident. There was even the possibility that the twisted end to the story of their engagement would have just become a topic of conversation among high society, without his connection to the empire ever being made public.

However—Amelia was Sarge's assistant.

Since she was deeply connected to Sarge and knew the particulars of his research, Amelia—unbeknownst to her—had become a very important figure within the kingdom.

So the story of Amelia's broken engagement had not ended there; rather, the Beltz Empire had caught wind of Amelia's newfound importance and targeted her using Reese. In fact, that was the conclusion the knights had come to after their investigation into the matter.

So Julius headed off to conduct his inspection.

The Thurma domain—the home of the people who she had once thought would become her parents-in-law and brother-in-law—would be no more.

That thought made her feel a bit guilty.

But there was no longer anything Amelia could do for the Thurmas, with whom she had already cut ties.

The rest of the group parted with Julius, who would come to the Lenia domain after his inspection was complete, and Amelia boarded the carriage with Sarge and Marie.

Their destination was drawing near.

Even though it was summer, the wind that was blowing as they were boarding the carriage felt a bit chilly. Amelia looked up at the sky to see a covering of ash-gray clouds; it looked like rain.

We had a lot of this kind of weather last year too.

Recalling that, Amelia anticipated that this summer would not be a very hot one either.

When she was a child, the summers had been so hot that she would often be scolded for playing in the water after she said she would help out. But recently, it had begun raining more frequently, and the days when she'd had to help with the watering had dwindled in number. Before the development of the cold-resistant grains, she would wait impatiently for a sunny day, throwing open her curtains each morning to check the sky.

Insects were definitely a nuisance, but they were manageable with a bit of labor. But even with magic, there wasn't much one could do to combat something like the weather.

She couldn't believe that Sarge, the one responsible for the new

grain variety, would be coming to her home like this.

Even as she thought about that, the carriage continued on at its slow pace.

The region they were passing through, though not part of the Lenia domain, also had lots of farmland. Sarge was gazing out of the carriage window the entire time.

The lord of this land wasn't planting the new grain variety. As expected, the regular grain didn't seem to be thriving.

Apparently, they had had a shortage of labor, so rather than worry about the insect damage that came with planting the new grain, they'd opted for the ordinary grains, which required less manpower.

"Whose land is this?"

"Viscount Kittis'," Amelia answered promptly.

"Are they using magic on their land?"

"No, I suspect not. The Kittis have been wind mages for generations."

"...I see." Sarge nodded and lapsed into silence.

If they could perfect their new water magic, then the new grain could be planted in any domain. That was what they had thought, anyway, but, although there were comparatively more regions with water mages, it wasn't as if all of them would be able to employ water magic.

Even with the development of their new magic, this lord would probably continue planting the same type of grain.

There must be some way...

For the remainder of their journey, Amelia racked her brain for possibilities.

At last, their carriage arrived at Amelia's home, the Lenia domain. She hadn't even been gone for six months, but it felt as if she hadn't been back in years.

That must have been because the environment surrounding Amelia had changed so much.

This time last year, she had been walking around the fields by herself, thinking about Reese, who hadn't come back like he'd promised.

The carriage came to an abrupt halt, bringing her back to herself. They shouldn't have arrived at the manor yet.

Amelia raised her head to see the carriage doors opened and Sarge gone from his seat beside her. He must have ordered the carriage to stop.

"Sarge?"

As Amelia hurriedly disembarked from the carriage, she saw him next to a field, eagerly surveying the grain. Kaid, who had been

keeping pace with the carriage on horseback, also hurried to Sarge's side.

"Amelia, can you tell me about this soil?"

"Let's see... No earth magic, and water magic was only used for watering. The soil over there had earth magic used on it two years ago but not water magic. And on the opposite side, no earth or water magic," she answered, combing through her memory.

Kaid, who was by their side, looked astonished that Amelia remembered so much, but all the data about this land was in her head.

Hearing her answer, Sarge walked to the plot where Reese had used earth magic two years ago. Amelia and Kaid followed after him.

"Here?"

"Yes. However, that was two years ago, so there's likely not much magic left."

The memory of walking with Reese came to mind, and Amelia unconsciously wrung her hands.

She'd been sure she had put all that behind her.

She'd had such a bitter experience, and she'd believed she no longer thought anything of Reese at all, but just gazing out at the landscape like this brought back her memories of that time so readily.

Suddenly, her hands were wrapped in warmth—Sarge had clasped them in his.

"Sarge..."

As if clinging to the gentle warmth enveloping her cold heart, she squeezed his hands in return.

Then Sarge began casting magic over the field where Reese had once used earth magic.

He filled the plot with powerful magic that Reese's couldn't hold a candle to.

All the while holding Amelia's hands.

Now, whenever she looked at this field, she wouldn't be reminded of Reese. She would be reminded of the warmth of the hands that were holding hers now.

When they returned to the carriage, they found that Marie—whom they had left behind—had gone on ahead to the manor.

Amelia's parents had been concerned that they still hadn't arrived, so they'd sent out another carriage for them; Marie had taken that carriage back.

Ah, we kept her waiting for a while, didn't we?

They'd done quite a rude thing to Marie. Once they arrived at the manor, Amelia would have to apologize.

When they finally arrived, her parents welcomed them, looking a bit exhausted.

"Father, mother, sorry we're late."

They had apparently been waiting since the afternoon in order to greet Sarge. It was now already evening.

Her father greeted them, though he was unable to mask his fatigue. She felt a bit bad about that.

She properly apologized to Marie, whom they had also left waiting, and greeted her cousin and Meena, who had arrived there earlier.

“Welcome to the Lenia domain. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Not at all. Thank you kindly for having me,” responded Meena, as though she were the host showing concern for her guest after her journey.

That night, the Lenias held a dinner party to welcome their guests.

Since the Lenia domain had lots of farmland, a rich array of ingredients was available to them, including some things that they did not have in the royal capital, which enticed Sarge’s interest. Their dinner must have been simple fare by his standards, unworthy of comparison to what they ate at the royal castle, but Amelia was relieved that he seemed to be enjoying himself.

The biggest room in the manor had been prepared for Sarge to use during their stay.

And yet he spent most of his time in the parlor.

He wanted to review Amelia’s data, but all the past data was stored in the cellar. There was no way she would take him somewhere like that.

So she brought the documents up to the parlor to allow him to look at them there. He spent three days analyzing the data, and after finishing with that to a certain extent, he headed out to examine the farmland.

Julius arrived a few days after Amelia and the others. He and Marie spent their time touring the village and the farmland.

Kaid’s younger sister Meena was being shown around the domain by Sol and was casting earth magic on the fields under Sarge’s instruction.

While Sarge and Amelia toured the farmland, they carried out several magical experiments.

One day, as usual, they were casting magic on some crops they had planted for experimental purposes.

Amelia felt the air suddenly get a bit cooler, and she looked up to see that the sky had clouded over.

If they didn’t make their way back to the manor soon, they would get rained on.

She called out to Sarge with that thought in mind, but the rain was faster than her words—it began to pour.

It was a harder rain than she had been expecting, and it began to thunder as well. For that reason, they weren't even able to take shelter under a tree, and in an instant, they were drenched.

"It seems we'll have a lot of rain this year too," Sarge muttered, pushing back his sopping-wet golden hair and looking up at the sky.

Sarge and Amelia had taken refuge in an old farm shed along with Kaid.

If they stayed wet, they'd come down with something. They needed to return to the carriage quickly, but it was raining quite intensely, so it would be better to wait in the shed until the rain relented a bit.

"...Rain."

While Amelia was listening to the hammering rain, she was struck with a sudden thought. She turned to look at Sarge.

"If we used a spell that could reproduce rain, couldn't we use that as a substitute for watering magic?"

Watering magic required three incantations: "water," "wide range," and "downpour."

If they could combine those into "rain," then they could add in "pest," "protect," and "detox" to ward against insect damage, bringing them to four ancient magic words. Four was still a lot, but it was an improvement over the six they'd had before.

"Rain? That could work. Shall we try it out? Instead of adhering to the conventions of existing magic, it might be more effective to create something new," Sarge replied in agreement.

And with that, their days filled with designing magic circles began.

First, they needed to create water magic that could reproduce rain. This was easier to create than Amelia's watering magic, so they were able to complete it quickly. Building upon that, they needed to add in the ancient words for "pest" and "protect" as well as the water magic "detox."

Since Sarge was unable to use water magic, he concentrated his efforts on designing magic circles, which Amelia attempted to activate one after another.

However, it wasn't so easily accomplished. Combining two forms of already existing water magic was difficult in itself, and since they wanted to add two more effects to that, the magic circle ended up becoming quite complicated.

Among other things, they could only activate "rain," "pest," and "protect," meanwhile often failing to produce the detoxification effects.

The order in which the words were written into the magic circle was also important and very complex.

Sarge became engrossed in his work, and once Amelia realized he was routinely continuing all through the night, she cautioned him against doing so. She was also testing out the magic late into the night, but she always made sure to get some sleep before morning.

Despite that, she ended up getting a scolding from Julius, just as Sarge did.

“You’re overdoing it too, Amelia.”

From then on, Julius, as someone skilled in water magic, lent her his assistance. Amelia’s cousin, who could also use water magic, began helping as well.

Meena made her rounds of the farmland in Sarge’s place, casting earth magic on the fields. Marie said she wanted to help too, but naturally, wind magic and rain did not really go together.

Hurricanes were the enemy of farmland, after all.

Afterwards, they continued to work on developing their new magic almost daily.

“Detox magic should be first. Let’s put the rain reproduction magic last.”

“Yes, both seem to activate just fine.”

By the time they were finally able to get the right combination and obtain the effect they wanted, their summer holiday was nearing its end.

“We managed to activate the magic, but...” Amelia muttered.

“Right, this magic circle is too complex, so it’ll be difficult to put to widespread use.”

Moving forward, they would have to focus on increasing the success rate.

It was a bit early to say they’d perfected the magic, but they had definitely advanced a step.

Having finally gotten a bit of free time, she had a sudden thought. Marie and Meena had come all the way here, but Amelia and Sarge had been so preoccupied with developing magic and writing up data that they hadn’t done anything to enjoy their holiday.

With that thought, Amelia suggested they all go on a picnic. Marie and Meena happily agreed with her idea.

She asked her family’s chef to prepare lunches for them, but thinking the three of them could also make something together, they decided to try baking cookies.

Naturally, she was a bit worried about serving members of the royal family something homemade, but Meena said, “We can just make my brother test them first,” so they decided to try it out.

Amelia felt a bit bad for Kaid, thinking he must’ve gotten treated like that in his own home too. However, it was clear that Meena loved

him dearly and that he was a caring older brother.

The three of them tried their best to follow the chef's instructions, but they were three daughters of counts who did not normally cook for themselves.

They spent several hours working on the cookies, but among the many that were crumbled and burnt, only a few survived looking somewhat decent.

The girls decided to set those aside for the picnic the following day, and the three of them held a "taste-testing party" with the broken cookies.

Meena was the first to try a cookie. "They're a bit unsightly, but they're actually quite crispy and delicious," she said with a smile.

Amelia and Marie each promptly picked up a broken cookie as well.

"Oh, they are tasty!"

"But I thought I was a bit more skilled than that..." Marie said with a sigh.

Amelia nodded, thinking the same about herself. She'd been able to do so many other things that she'd thought she would have no difficulty doing something like baking cookies.

"We can do better next time, though. Shall we try again sometime?"

Amelia and Marie nodded and smiled at Meena's positivity.

They would have another holiday in the winter.

The fields would lie fallow until spring, so it would be difficult for Sarge and Julius to justify a visit during that season, but the three girls could come here at any time. They promised to bake together again then.

The next day, the sky was sunny and clear, and their group of seven walked to a secluded spot with an excellent view.

Amelia had been the one to decide that it would be fun to walk there together.

However, they had to stop each time an interesting plant caught Sarge's eye, which slowed down their progress.

When they finally arrived at their destination, it was near midday.

"Let's hurry and get everything set up."

With the help of the escorts provided by the Lenias, they began setting up their lunch.

Recently, sudden changes in weather had become common in this region. Amelia wanted to make sure they could have lunch while the sky was clear.

They spread a sheet over the ground and placed baskets on top of it. The baskets were filled with foods that could easily be eaten with one hand.

Everyone sat down on the sheet and divided up the food. The chef had really gone all out—the food was simple but delicious nonetheless.

At the end of their meal, Amelia presented the cookies and said, “The three of us tried our hand at making these.”

“Brother, you first,” Meena said.

Kaid, who was sitting a bit removed from the three couples, looked at her in surprise. “Me?”

“Yeah. Just in case they’re poisoned.”

“...Ah, I see.”

Kaid took one cookie with a bitter smile, but Amelia was relieved when he said it was delicious. Julius and Sol also praised the cookies, but Sarge in particular seemed considerably impressed with them. He asked if they could make them back in the capital as well, so Amelia decided to make sure to ask the chef to show her the recipe again.



Fortunately, they were able to make it back to the manor before it began to rain.

Soon, they would have to return to the capital.

But they had been able to get their hands on the most recent data, and the completion of their water magic was in sight. Thanks to Sarge and Meena, the soil was now overflowing with magic; Amelia was looking forward to the next harvest.

After a fruitful holiday, she and the others returned to the capital.

The summer holiday ended, and the academy classes resumed.

And so would resume Amelia's days of commuting from the castle to the laboratory.

There was something Amelia had been wanting to test out. She told Sarge what she had been thinking about all throughout the holiday.

"I'm thinking of making some kind of enchanted water that has an insect-repelling effect."

"Enchanted water?" Sarge echoed with great interest, and Amelia explained her idea.

"If I can perfect it, I think it could be useful for people who can't use water magic. It will take some effort, but I was thinking of making insect-repellent enchanted water that people could spread over fields to get the same result they would with our water magic."

Having to inspect farmland for insect damage all the time was much too labor intensive for people like the nobles in the territory neighboring the Lenias', who had only wind magic at their disposal and couldn't plant the new variety of grain.

But if, after planting, all they had to do was scatter the enchanted water once, planting the new variety would yield larger harvests. Plus, if she were to develop the magic needed to make enchanted water, she could just use the three incantations "pest," "protect," and "detox." Anyone who could use water magic would be able to make it, so it could probably be sold at a low cost too.

After hearing Amelia's idea, Sarge nodded, impressed.

"That's right. I've only been thinking of water magic. But just as you say, there are many people who can't use it. Let's see if we can make something that works."

Thus they began working to develop a new magic they could use to create the insect-repellent enchanted water.

While Sarge contributed some advice and suggestions, Amelia did everything else, including designing the magic circle.

As a result, this enchanted water ended up being even more highly acclaimed than their new water magic.

Nobles were the only ones who could use magic.

However, there were far more commoners in the kingdom than nobles. If Sarge and Amelia could sell enchanted water at a fair price, they would enable everyone to obtain the same effects they could have with the new water magic.

What's more, Sarge announced that the developer of the enchanted water was Amelia and Amelia alone.

Of course it had been Amelia's idea, but she wouldn't have been able to get as far as she had without Sarge's help.

Despite her saying that, Sarge refused to listen.

"Not at all—this is your own achievement. I had no part in the idea. I'm happy you're being acknowledged for this."

Matching his words, a smile lit up Sarge's face.

After repeated experiments to confirm its safety, enchanted water was licensed for sale.

There was soon a rush of inquiries from lords who owned a lot of farmland.

For Amelia, leaving her mark as the developer was enough, so she'd given all the commercial rights pertaining to enchanted water to the kingdom. There had been some discussion of her receiving compensation, but she had humbly declined.

From the beginning of their research, the two of them had really been pursuing permission to become engaged.

However, the king had already given his direct approval after enchanted water was licensed. Amelia was on her way to becoming the wife of royalty, so she had no need for further compensation.

It was natural for someone who was soon to join the royal family to serve the kingdom.

Now that it was harvest season, Amelia was busy, but after the new year, the two of them would be holding a party to announce their engagement.

Then Amelia would be officially recognized as Sarge's fiancée.

One day, even with the date of the approaching party on their minds, Amelia and Sarge were checking over the data that her cousin had sent to her.

This year, as had been the recent trend, the crops had been hit badly by cold weather, but the harvest had increased a bit from last year. Next year, if the territories that purchased enchanted water could plant the new grain, then surely crop yields would increase throughout the kingdom.

She was glad to have been able to contribute to the national welfare.

But what made her happier than anything else was the fact that she'd earned the qualification necessary to stay by Sarge's side.

After the harvest season ended, it was only a matter of time before the new year.

In her spare moments between recording this year's data, Amelia was busy preparing for the engagement party.

Sarge had not had so much as a single fiancée candidate, and so the announcement of his engagement, following that of Julius and coupled with the coming of the new year, had the kingdom buzzing with celebration.

And, with the development of Amelia's enchanted water, she had earned renown as the young noblewoman who showed consideration even for the commoners, who couldn't use magic.

The impending engagement was between that very person and the fourth prince, who was hard at work on the new grain variety and the magical development of agriculture. The number of people who rejoiced at their engagement was more than they could have ever imagined.

Then the day of their engagement party finally arrived.

The royal capital was bustling with people—so said Marie, who had come to see her.

In order to thoroughly check that there were no illegal infiltrators in the kingdom for the day of the party, Julius as well as Sarge had been making frequent trips to the borders over the past several days. Amelia knew it was so they could use reenactment magic, but she still felt anxious at Sarge's leaving the capital.

However, it was thanks to their efforts that the couple would be able to hold their engagement party in safety.

Amelia had been busy with preparations since that morning, and she had just gotten a chance to breathe after finally getting fully dressed.

Her dress, an opulent creation of silk and lace, was not the vibrant emerald green color of Sarge's eyes but pure white. Instead, it was her gold-crafted hair ornament and necklace that were inlaid with emeralds.

Sophia and Marie, who had been with Amelia since the morning, looked at her affectionately as she checked her appearance in the mirror multiple times.

"Say, Amelia, do you know why your dress for the engagement party is white?"

Amelia shook her head. She had been wondering, but she'd never asked.

"Giving your partner a white dress for her engagement party is proof that you love her so much that you can't wait to get married. Julius gave me a regular dress for our party, remember?"

Amelia was so enviably beloved. That's what Marie said to her while smiling at her tenderly.

At those unexpected words, Amelia let out an inarticulate yelp and rushed to her feet—but the others quickly scolded her not to let the dress wrinkle, prompting her to sit back down.

"I-I had no idea about that..."

Amelia would soon have to walk out in front of a crowd of people at the engagement party while wearing this white dress.

"Prince Sarge is surprisingly passionate, isn't he?" Marie said.

Sophia nodded. "Yes, he is. When Alexis and I got engaged, I just wore a blue dress."

She was so happy to be loved. Amelia herself loved him so much that she wanted to give her feelings form.

But being told again how much he loved her was so embarrassing that she covered her face with both hands.

"...This is all for you."

The one who had said that gently while looking at Amelia was Sophia.

"The nobles of this kingdom are not all good people. There are people who will look down on you for being the daughter of a country noble. There may also be those who will try to use you in some way. That white dress is to protect you from those kinds of people."

She wasn't just his work partner, she was the love of his life. Sarge was trying to make that absolutely clear in order to protect Amelia.

Hearing that, Amelia had to take several deep breaths to calm herself down.

Not even a year had passed since she had been betrayed by Reese and suffered from isolation due to that terrible rumor he'd spread. It was for that reason that her heart wasn't used to being protected and cherished like she was now.

"It'll be all right. We'll be right here with you."

"That's right. And soon, we'll all be sisters, won't we?"

Sophia and Marie wrapped the flustered Amelia's hands in theirs. Their kindness helped calm her heart.

Amelia loved Sarge.

She wished to be by his side, supporting him, for as long as she lived.

Even his family and their fiancées warmly welcomed Amelia.

Amelia smiled, knowing there was nothing to be afraid of.

"...Yes. Thank you so much," she said, pouring all her gratitude into her words. Marie and Sophia both gave her wide, fond smiles.

"Although—even though you'll be wearing a white dress to your engagement party, I'll be the one getting married first," said Marie with a teasing smile.

One couldn't get married without first graduating from the academy. Since Marie was one year older than Amelia, it was a matter of course that she would get married first.

But when Amelia realized they would have to be engaged for two more years, she felt a bit disappointed.

An engagement was a promise, but it wasn't definite. Amelia and Reese had been engaged for ten long years, after all. Moreover, Sarge was royalty. If the kingdom's situation changed, there was a possibility that their engagement would have to be broken off. Thinking that, she grew anxious.

"I want to hurry up and get married..." she said without thinking, making Sophia and Marie giggle. That brought her back to her senses, and, realizing what she had just said out loud, she held her blushing cheeks and cast her eyes down.

"Well, then, it seems it's about time to start."

Sophia and Marie left the waiting room to finish their own preparations.

Now on her own, Amelia stood up, taking care not to wrinkle her dress, and looked in the mirror at her image dressed in white.

She'd once thought she would be getting married to Reese. She had never even imagined any other potential future. Then he'd betrayed her, and she had been left to cry time after time in despair. She'd thought she had no one she could trust.

But now, she was so incredibly happy.

"Amelia."

Sarge had come to get her; he extended his hand to her.

Taking his hand firmly in hers, Amelia smiled.



Sarge escorted her to the venue, where numerous people welcomed them.

There were also some disapproving gazes among the crowd. But this white dress—and Sarge’s love—would protect her.

His Majesty the King’s majestic voice rang out through the venue, rejoicing in the couple’s engagement.

His sharp, virile features resembled those of Alexis and Julius, and his hair was the same golden color as Sarge’s. Her Majesty the Queen, standing by his side, was the clear prototype of Sarge.

The royal couple welcomed their son’s engagement to Amelia, who, despite all her achievements, was still the mere daughter of a country noble.

In order to repay her debt of gratitude, she would continue supporting Sarge as his assistant and as his fiancée.

Music began to play—it was time for the first dance.

As if by coincidence, it was the same song that had played during the welcome party for new students.

As Sarge easily led her through the steps, Amelia remembered that day.

No matter how many years passed, even after they became a married couple, she was certain that each time they danced, she would remember that same welcome party, and each time she would fall in love with him all over again.

Interlude: The Knight Guard's Fiancée

The Kingdom of Bedeiht was situated in the northernmost part of the continent.

Even so, the weather was relatively mild, and even when winter came, snow fell only in very few regions of the kingdom. With mild weather year-round, it should have been an easy place to live.

However, with the passage of the years, the weather had been getting colder, and this year, snow fell on the capital for the very first time. While the rare sight was a treat for the children, it was not a very good thing.

In recent years, the entire continent had been suffering from cold-weather damage, and the threat of a food shortage was growing ever closer. The situation hadn't yet reached a crisis point, but if temperatures continued to decrease like this, there was no telling what would happen.

For several years now, however, the kingdom had been developing a new variety of grain in response to the cold-weather damage, an endeavor that had at last shown results. Even now, the development process was advancing, and in several years, any major issues would surely have been worked out; then the new variety would be perfectly adapted to cold weather.

That was why, even with the cold weather worsening year after year, the kingdom was able to deal with the situation calmly.

And the one who bore the responsibility for developing that new variety of grain, which could be called the lifeline of this kingdom, was its fourth prince, Sarge.

He was still a student at the Royal Academy of Magic, but he was specializing in earth magic and botany. If it hadn't been for him, the new variety of grain wouldn't have been developed.

However, the Bedeiht Kingdom was not the only country suffering from cold weather. The problem was widespread on this side of the precipitous mountain range that divided the continent; moreover, and in contrast to Bedeiht and its neighbors, the Beltz Empire, which lay on the other side of the mountains, was suffering from desertification caused by a lack of rainfall.

Of course, the kingdom and other countries had earth mages, and likely botanists as well. However, with the added blessing of light

magic, Sarge had a unique combination of talents.

In fact, the Beltz Empire had once attempted to kidnap Sarge when he was a child.

At that time, any of the princes, all of whom had the light magic affinity, would have done. They must have targeted the youngest brother because he seemed easy to lure away. Now his value was even higher than it had been when he was a child.

That was why it was understandable that, instead of being escorted by a fellow student, he would be assigned a knight as his personal guard.

However, Kaid had never imagined that he would be selected for that position, much less that he would be personally appointed by Crown Prince Alexis himself.

Kaid, who was a member of the knights' order, was the second son of Count Eded.

The Eded family was a noble family of high standing that from long ago had been tied to various families through marriage. Therefore, the children of that family had always been born with differing affinities.

Even now, although his father was a wind mage and his mother a water mage, Kaid's eldest brother had the power of wind, Kaid that of fire, and his older sister that of water. His youngest sister, Meena, could use earth magic.

Kaid, as a second son, had decided to aim to become a knight in order to put his fire magic to good use. He'd worked hard in his training before even entering school, and soon after enrolling in the academy, he'd been appointed as bodyguard to Prince Alexis, who was in the same year as him.

However, Alexis was strong enough himself that he didn't even require a bodyguard.

As a child, Alexis had possessed such strong magical power that he had been unable to control it. He'd solved that issue by training with a sword.

Furthermore, after his youngest brother was nearly abducted, Alexis had devoted himself even more intensely to his swordsmanship, driven by a desire to protect his family. Now he was stronger than a proper knight.

Nonetheless, ever since their brief acquaintance, Alexis seemed to have taken a liking to Kaid, and after graduating from the academy, he would repeatedly call upon him. Kaid would also have to take part in many trifling tasks, like acting as Alexis's sword partner, or taking part in an experiment to combine fire magic and swordsmanship.

So when Alexis summoned Kaid, he went to the prince's side without thinking much of it beyond assuming this time would be

much like the others.

But this time, Alexis ordered Kaid to be Fourth Prince Sarge's knight guard.

"Prince Sarge's knight guard?"

Sarge, who was seven years younger than Alexis, must have still been a second-year at the Royal Academy of Magic. The academy itself was heavily guarded, so it was customary for fellow students to accompany a prince as an informal guard while he was in school. That was why Kaid had never thought that he, who had already graduated several years ago, would have been chosen to be Sarge's guard.

Alexis explained his reasoning. "Actually, we've received intel from the Janaki Kingdom regarding the Beltz Empire."

The Kingdom of Janaki, situated in the southern part of the continent, neighbored the Beltz Empire across the steep mountains. That being said, they didn't have much exchange with the other side of the mountain range and didn't receive much information, but it seemed rumors would occasionally come their way.

"Just like we're suffering from cold damage, they seem to have a big problem of their own over there, and they've apparently been making great efforts to find a solution. That's why I feel a bit uneasy with just a student guard."

The Beltz Empire might very well have been plotting against their kingdom again.

It seemed that was Alexis's concern.

However, all the children of the nobility attended the Royal Academy of Magic. That was why security was so tight.

So Alexis must have had another reason besides the threat posed by the empire for assigning a guard to his younger brother.

When Kaid expressed his skepticism, Alexis readily confessed.

"Sarge gets so into his research that he easily forgets to eat and drink. And he claims he focuses better alone, so he often shakes off his guards and wanders around alone."

"...He seems quite troublesome, doesn't he?"

No matter how well guarded the academy grounds may have been, it was still dangerous for him to move about on his own. Alexis had also acted independently a lot of the time, but that was because he was strong.

"When you were my guard, no matter how often I gave you the slip, you always managed to find me pretty easily. I don't think Sarge will be able to escape from you either. You've always been a very caring person too, so I would feel better knowing you were by his side."

Alexis was praising Kaid's excellence, but Kaid was unhappy to have the painful memories of that time resurface.

Kaid had spent three years running after Alexis, who would always try to escape from him, saying he didn't need a guard.

He was about to lament the fact that those same pains were about to repeat themselves, but he couldn't refuse an order from his liege.

"For how long...?"

"Until Sarge graduates. Don't worry—I've asked the Alita family for permission and received Liliane's approval as well."

"...I see."

Kaid had a fiancée.

She was a young lady by the name of Liliane, the only daughter of Marquis Alita.

Kaid, as a second son, planned to marry into her family. He'd thought they would be getting married soon.

Moreover, the one who had set it all up had been Alexis; Liliane was Crown Princess Sophia's close friend.

Kaid had built a peaceful relationship with his fiancée, but their marriage would now likely be postponed until after Sarge graduated. However, if she accepted the delay, he couldn't use his impending nuptials to beg off the assignment.

"All right, then. When do I start?"

Since they had been together from their school days and were now familiar with each other, Alexis didn't rebuke Kaid for his casual response. Instead, he responded happily, "Tomorrow. Of course, only within the academy. On his days off, he'll have a knight in the castle guarding him."

If he was only assigned to Sarge at the academy, that wouldn't be so bad.

That was what Kaid had been thinking at the time.

He never imagined how much he would regret that thought.

After leaving the castle, Kaid decided to go and see his fiancée, Liliane.

She must have known the details of the situation, but he wanted to explain everything to her himself. He sent a messenger to let her know he was coming, then went to town to get her a small bouquet of flowers as well as some of the town's popular baked confections before heading to the Alita family's home.

Liliane welcomed Kaid and prepared some tea.

After they exchanged greetings, he gave her the gifts he'd brought with him, which she accepted happily.

"Thank you, Kaid."

She had warm, honey-colored hair and kind green eyes, with which she looked at Kaid as she smiled tenderly at him. She didn't have Sophia's shining beauty, but her gentleness put him at ease.

He informed her that Alexis had appointed him as Fourth Prince Sarge's knight guard and that he would have to stay by his side protecting him until he graduated, and apologized that their wedding would have to be postponed.

"That is fine with me. Prince Alexis and Princess Sophia have already told me about the circumstances, and they have also kindly offered me their apologies," she said, then smiled.

It seemed she had heard about this before him.

He promised to come visit her on his days off, and the next day, Kaid started his position as Sarge's guard.

To get straight to the point, the first day had been considerably tough.

When he'd been appointed as Sarge's knight guard, he hadn't imagined he would witness the scene that had unfolded at the academy that day, in which Third Prince Julius's fiancée candidate was stripped of that title.

Remembering that day, Kaid let out a deep sigh.

The morning of that day, he'd first gone to the castle.

From the following day, Kaid would be waiting for Sarge's arrival in front of the academy, but as it was his first day, it was decided that he would greet him at the castle. There, Alexis planned to formally introduce Kaid as his bodyguard. Kaid has assumed Sarge was also aware of the plan.

However, Sarge didn't appear no matter how long Kaid waited. Worried, Alexis went to go look for his brother and found that he had been shut in the castle library all night.

Over and above concentrating so hard that he forgot to eat and drink, it seemed he would lose all sense of the time. Thinking that it would be even more difficult starting out tomorrow, Kaid went ahead and accompanied Sarge as his guard today.

Perhaps because Sarge was unaccustomed to walking around with a guard, or perhaps simply because his attention was constantly being drawn elsewhere, he would often try to walk ahead of Kaid into areas that the knight had yet to secure.

Although Kaid had to warn him several times that having a guard was meaningless if he behaved that way, they somehow made it to the end of the day without any serious incident. Kaid felt relieved that the last thing remaining was to see Sarge back to the royal castle, but then, the moment class ended, Sarge rushed out of the classroom.

Kaid followed after him in a hurry, asking where he was going, and the prince answered that a first-year student had compiled some agricultural data into documents for him and he wanted to go pick it up from her.

It seemed Sarge had been preoccupied thinking of the contents of those documents since the morning.

But that was when that incident had occurred.

Third Prince Julius had removed Lady Keadly from his list of potential fiancées, and then she had been expelled from school.

Until one enrolled in the academy, one was permitted to use magic for the purpose of practice. However, once one became a student, if one's character came into question such that one was unable to graduate, one's magic would be sealed away. If that happened, one wouldn't merely be left unable to use one's magic, but one's future as a noble would also be closed off.

All that was left for Lady Keadly now was to leave her home and become a commoner or a nun.

What she had done had been so malicious that she couldn't have avoided punishment.

She'd ordered the belongings of another female student—one who was helping with Sarge's research—thrown into the courtyard fountain, blamed it on other people, and forced them to give a false testimony. Although her other classmates had gotten off with a stern warning, the experience must have taught them that this place was not a simple academy but a place where their quality as nobles would be under scrutiny.

Afterwards, Sarge and that other female student became close, and he'd begun seeing her more and more often.

Her name was Amelia, and she was a lovely, petite girl.

Apparently, she was the daughter of the Lenias, a count family that owned a large domain up north. The data from their farmland would be of great use to Sarge's research.

Perhaps because of that, they even got along well as friends.

Whenever he became too engrossed in his research, Sarge—who rarely listened to his own older brothers—properly listened to and accepted Amelia's words. Kaid was also thankful that, in an effort to avoid being alone with Amelia, Sarge would make sure to walk with his guard.

But Amelia herself had turned out to be the same type of person Sarge was.

Once she began assisting him in his research, the two of them would frequently lose track of time. Depending on the day, they would sometimes continue their research from the morning until the school closed.

Even Kaid, who had been trained as a knight, couldn't focus for that long, so he felt concerned watching the two of them become utterly immersed in their work for hours at a time without so much as taking a break. Yet oftentimes, when he tried to get their attention,

they wouldn't respond, and thinking that if he interrupted them, things would go on for even longer, he generally decided to watch over them quietly.

The reason Sarge worked so seriously on his research was for the sake of the kingdom's future.

If the unseasonable weather continued like this, the kingdom would undoubtedly be faced with a food shortage in the near future.

And it was unlikely that the problem would be restricted to the Kingdom of Bedeiht. Cold-weather damage was becoming a serious problem for other countries as well, and the Beltz Empire on the other side of the mountain range was also having problems.

If things continued on like this, then there was even a possibility that the countries would find themselves fighting among each other over a meager supply of food.

In order to prevent that, Sarge was pushing himself to work on the new variety. Amelia was also giving her all in an effort to support him.

Kaid was frustrated that the only thing he could do was watch over the two of them as he had been.

He was recounting that story to Liliane, whom he had visited on his day off, when he suddenly came back to himself.

"I'm sorry. I'm talking about work on my day off."

"It's fine." Liliane smiled gently at the flustered Kaid. "Prince Sarge and Lady Amelia are essential to this kingdom. I am very happy to hear anything about those two."

Kaid was relieved to hear her say that, but he felt he should try to avoid talking about work as much as he could, and so he changed the subject and began telling her about the time he'd gone to the Lenia domain while the academy students were on summer break.

"I was surprised at just how big it is. There's farmland as far as the eye can see."

It was a domain in which natural beauty and adorable wildlife abounded.

He told her about their picnic in a wide clearing, and how his sister had made him act as poison tester and try the cookies. Liliane listened with great interest all the while.

"A picnic outdoors sounds like such great fun."

"Shall we go on an outing during the next holiday?"

"I'll have to ask you to prepare the lunches for that, then."

Kaid's little sister Meena would be marrying into that same Lenia domain.

Next year, Meena would be entering the academy and would be officially engaged to Amelia's cousin Sol. Kaid felt it was a fitting family to marry into for an earth mage like her.

Kaid doted on his sister, younger than him by several years, and was delighted that she'd been blessed with a good match.

And Sarge himself had officially been engaged to Amelia.

Sarge, who had once done nothing but research botany and perform magic experiments, seemed to enjoy being with her.

Kaid wished them—the two he had been keeping watch over—well from the bottom of his heart.

However, being their guard was considerably taxing. Since Amelia was now the fiancée of royalty, wouldn't she need her own bodyguard? Alexis had said so too, but Sarge was reluctant on that point.

It seemed that, even if it was a bodyguard, he didn't want another man to be so close to Amelia. Seeing Sarge, who usually kept his expression so unchanging that his fine-featured face had a doll-like blankness, look deeply jealous was so amusing that, although it would be tough for Kaid, he'd given up on that point.

Hearing that, Liliane suddenly went quiet.

Kaid was about to apologize for talking about work again, but she raised her head and looked at him with a serious expression.

"Could I possibly become Lady Amelia's knight guard?"

"...Huh?"

"If she had a female knight, Prince Sarge would feel better about it, wouldn't he?"

"Well, yes, but..."

Although they were few in number, female knights did exist. They were skilled in fighting with magic; indeed, their skills were on par with those of male knights. Female knights often served as the guards of noblewomen. Considering that, it would be natural for Sarge's fiancée, Amelia, to have a female knight as a bodyguard.

So even Kaid, though bewildered, agreed. Having received his response, Liliane immediately stood up.

"Then I'll ask Sophia to recommend me. I may not look it, but I'm quite skilled with a sword."

"I know that."

Since they were soon to be wed, Liliane had quit the knights' order, but she had once been his comrade in arms.

Her combination of wind magic and swordsmanship had been so magnificent that even Alexis had praised her for it. Kaid knew how this gentle, kind woman could change entirely when she got hold of a blade.

"Also, if I become Lady Amelia's guard, then I can be close to you, Prince Sarge's guard. It's lonely only seeing you on your days off."

When she said that with such a captivating smile on her face, he couldn't refuse.

He would also be happy to have her by his side.

But he had entirely failed to consider that Liliane becoming bodyguard to Amelia, who was a year younger than Sarge, would mean Kaid and Liliane's marriage would be postponed for an extra year.

Even as Kaid thought about that, he admired the way that Liliane called out to the two immersed in their research and skillfully enticed them to take a break.

Epilogue: The Phantom White Flower

“The phantom white flower?”

Amelia tilted her head, puzzled at the story she had just heard from a female researcher with whom she had become familiar.

That day, she had been with Sarge in the library since the morning. But in order to borrow a reference book, Amelia had left his side and visited the magic laboratory on her own.

“Yes, that’s right. In a place a bit removed from the capital, there blooms a white flower that’s never been seen here before.”

While helping Amelia find the book she was looking for, the woman had told her all the details about the flower.

A flower expert had apparently tried to bring it back to conduct research on it, but no matter how carefully they tried to dig it up, it would quickly wither away.

If it was something even an expert had never seen before, it must have been some new variety.

The story caught Amelia’s interest. But it seemed that in order to see it, she would have to leave the capital.

I wonder what kind of flower it is...

Curious, she casually mentioned it to Sarge after returning to the library.

Now that they had completed their new water magic, Sarge was working even harder at improving the new grain variety even further. It was expected that next year would bring another cool summer, and there was a possibility that the domains that were still planting the traditional grains would see their crop yields halved. That was why the two of them were aiming to popularize the use of enchanted water and make the new variety even more resistant to cold-weather damage.

“A white flower, hmm?” murmured Sarge after Amelia told him the story.

He raised his head from the thick magic book he had been absorbed in reading and looked out the window.

Amelia followed his gaze and looked out the window as well.

The season was already changing to autumn.

The leaves of the large trees in the courtyard had been dyed a brilliant red. The breeze lightly shook the window frame and scattered

the leaves like flower petals.

The sight of it made Amelia suddenly recall last year's autumn.

Around this time last year, she had been going out quite frequently in order to make her rounds of the farms, which were soon to welcome the harvest. But recently, things here had become so busy that her days were filled only with coming and going between the academy and the castle.

She began to grow a bit nostalgic for that wide-open farmland.

That sight of the evening sun sinking below the horizon, dyeing the world in crimson.

Those golden ears of grain, welcoming the fast-approaching harvest, rippling in the cool breeze that caressed her cheek.

That familiar scenery of the land she had been born and raised in.

But this was her life from now on, and she would have to get used to it.

That was what she told herself, and after finishing her conversation with Sarge, she decided to return to working on her own magical research. As if changing places with her, Sarge headed for the laboratory.

I need to work harder.

Amelia's current goal was to continue diversifying the types of water magic, which had previously been used only for healing. Sarge was able to advise her on several things, but his specialty was earth magic.

That was why Amelia was taking the lead in the water magic research.

"It's almost closing time."

She'd apparently been focusing quite a bit; when Kaid said that to her, she came back to her senses.

Sarge had returned from the laboratory just a moment ago, and, unusually for him, had already started packing up.

Amelia also prepared her things in a hurry.

They parted ways with Kaid when they reached the carriage, but no sooner had it set off for the castle than Sarge made it stop.

"Sarge?"

"It seems I've left behind some documents. I'll go and get them."

"I'll go with you."

Amelia stood up hastily, thinking that, no matter how nearby his destination, she shouldn't let Sarge go on his own.

He had the carriage wait for them in front of the academy gates, and the two of them were about to make their way back to the library when Sarge took Amelia by the hand and headed not for the library but for the back gate.

"Um, where are we going?"

Although she was confused, Sarge wouldn't let go of her hand, so she couldn't stop. All she could do was follow after him.

"Amelia, let's go see that white flower."

Was he seriously suggesting they leave the capital?

Thinking that was his plan, Amelia stopped in her tracks.

"No. It's too dangerous."

If they'd at least had Kaid with them, Amelia probably would have agreed to go. But Sarge's guard only stayed with him on the academy grounds, and he had likely already returned home for the day.

Of course, Amelia had also been thinking she wanted to take a bit of a breather, but she could not put Sarge's safety at risk in order to do so.

"Oh, I've no intention of leaving the capital. We're just going to the back garden."

"Huh?"

"I also tried asking the researcher about the flower, and I think it might be the same one."

Saying that, he brought Amelia to a small garden located around the back of the academy.

There lay a flower bed where several different types of flowers bloomed. It was a spot Sarge occasionally used for his experiments.

Was that white flower blooming here?

While continuing to lead her by the hand, Sarge walked farther into the flower bed.

It was already dusk.

Red light shone through the cracks in the clouds, illuminating Sarge's back.

The chilly breeze was a bit humid, meaning it was likely to rain soon.

Amelia looked up at the sky, which was similar in color to last year's sky over the Lenia domain. She had been feeling anxious about her quickly changing environment, but that brought her some comfort.

And then Sarge pointed out a white flower that had been planted in the interior of the flower bed.

"That flower."

The researcher had called it a phantom flower, so she'd thought it would be something splendid like a rose, but it was actually rather cute. A blossom consisting of several small petals bloomed atop its short stem.

"So pretty," she said without thinking, and Sarge smiled.

"In its wild form, this flower blooms from spring through summer. When I was trying to make a grain that was resistant to cold weather, I selectively bred it to bloom in autumn as an experiment."

The original flower apparently had large petals.

“If it’s not in soil that’s filled with magic, it withers away instantly, so that was probably why that flower expert wasn’t able to take any back with them.”

All students had access to this flower bed, so someone had probably brought a seed back home with them, or maybe a bird had carried it to the outskirts of the capital, where it would have ended up in magic-filled soil to grow and blossom.

“So it was one of your flowers.”

“It seems so. I was trying my best to prevent it from propagating outside this flower bed so that it wouldn’t affect other ecosystems. That’s why no one else knew about it. Without magic, the ones outside will wither eventually, but just in case, I’ll go collect them.”

Amelia nodded, still gazing at the white flower.

It was a small, cute flower, and it reminded her of the wildflowers that bloomed in the margins of the Lenia farmland.

She and Sarge gazed at the flower for a while before suddenly coming back to reality.

“Ah, the school building is probably closed already. You left something behind...”

“Don’t worry about that. That was just an excuse.”

“An excuse?” Amelia tilted her head in confusion.

Since the flower bloomed within the academy grounds, they could just have seen it on their way out. But he’d taken the trouble to board the carriage only to make it turn back around again.

She didn’t understand why.

Seeing Amelia’s confused expression, Sarge smiled softly.

“If I hadn’t done it this way, we wouldn’t have gotten the chance to be alone together,” he whispered. He then took her hands in his again, making her heart pound.

When he put it like that, she realized that Sarge, a member of the royal family, was rarely alone. When he was at the academy, he had his guard, Kaid, and when he was in the castle, he always had someone by his side.

“I’m used to it already, but I’m sure it must be difficult for you. I’ve always worried that maybe you were feeling suffocated. And after we went to the Lenia domain, I’ve been thinking about it even more.”

“Sarge...”

When she realized he had been acting out of consideration for her, she couldn’t help but smile.

“I’m sorry for restricting your freedom. But now I can’t let you go anymore.”

Even as he apologized for stealing away her freedom, Sarge would not let go of Amelia’s hands.

“Sarge, I’m happy right now. So, please, don’t apologize.”

It was true that when she was home, she enjoyed an independent lifestyle. There were even days where she would decide what to do only after waking up in the morning.

She did miss that.

But she also didn’t want to return to that time.

Even if she returned to her freer life in the countryside, if she wasn’t with Sarge, it wouldn’t mean anything.

Hearing her response, a complex expression crossed Sarge’s face, a mixture of happiness and regret.

“I’m just like this flower. Without you, I’d wither away.”

He’d muttered it quietly, that he was like this phantom flower, which withered when it wasn’t filled with magic.

“And the same goes for me. So, please, stay by my side.”

As they confirmed their feelings for one another, they looked at the white flower, their hands still clasped together.

How long did they stay there like that?

When they suddenly came back to their senses, their surroundings had grown dim.

The coachman who was waiting with the carriage must have been worried about them.

“Sarge, we should...” Amelia prompted him quietly.

Sarge nodded. “You’re right. Let’s go.”

As Sarge let go of Amelia’s hand and walked ahead of her, his face returned to its customary expression of regal composure. That would surely be the face she saw most often. But still, if they could occasionally spend time together like this, just the two of them...

As she thought that and followed along behind him, she thought about those flowers that would wither once they were cut off from magic.

Those small white flowers that bloomed outside the capital were just like the person she used to be. If she hadn’t met Sarge, she would surely have withered away.

She decided to ask Sarge if they could take the flowers that were growing outside and replant them in this flower bed.

As she thought that, she looked up at the sky, which stretched all the way to the land she missed so dearly.

Extra Story: Apple Pie for a Winter's Day

In the guest room of the royal castle, Amelia was opening a letter that had arrived from her cousin Sol.

The time was already past midnight.

As she was compiling data about the newly developed water magic and enchanted water, it had grown so late.

The season was already approaching winter.

The temperatures dropped dramatically in the evenings now, making a jacket necessary.

She remembered Marie telling her that the capital never used to get this cold. With each passing year, the temperatures dropped further. At this rate, if the cold-weather damage continued, other crops besides grain would be greatly affected.

Amelia also noticed that Sarge was starting to compile data on other crops besides grain.

It was Amelia's duty to help him as much as she could so that his health didn't suffer as he became ever busier.

"It's getting cold. We have to take care, especially at night."

She wanted him to avoid pulling all-nighters if he could, at least.

As she thought about that, she looked over the thick letter her cousin had sent.

Gree, a staple food across the continent, was planted in spring and could be harvested in autumn. The harvest season must have been drawing to a close in the Lenia domain.

The Lenia domain had switched over to using the new variety of grain this year.

She was curious about how this year's harvest compared to last year's, so she had asked her cousin to keep her informed.

As he had yet to enroll in the academy, Sol had moved to the Lenia domain and was now apparently patrolling the farmland every day. Sometimes Meena, the younger sister of Sarge's knight guard Kaid, would also visit, and the two of them would patrol the lands together.

Amelia felt like the two of them were just like her and Reese when they had been engaged.

Around this time the year before last, before either of them enrolled in the academy, they had made their rounds of the farms, just

like Sol and Meena were doing now, and had talked about the future.

That incident seems like such a long time ago now...

Thinking about that time still made her heart ache slightly.

Reese, who had been Amelia's fiancé from the time she was five years old, had betrayed her and his kingdom and was now undergoing a harsh interrogation in the custody of the knights' order. Depending on the results, he might not have a chance of regaining his freedom.

If she had noticed that Reese was jealous of her, would things have turned out differently? Even if they couldn't have avoided breaking off their engagement, perhaps things wouldn't have reached this point.

That was a regret that still remained deep in her heart.

She continued reading the letter with those feelings in mind, and she was relieved to learn that the harvest had indeed increased, as she had expected. The new water magic she had tested out on her family's land had also proven successful.

The new grain variety, which had had water magic cast on it, had yielded a greater harvest than last year. If that fact became well known, the methods she and Sarge had devised could become more popular.

I'll need to report this to Sarge tomorrow.

Her downcast feelings had lifted somewhat, but when she read her cousin's letter all the way to the end, something caught her attention.

It was still late autumn, but snow had already fallen on the mountains.

The Lenia domain was situated in the northern part of the Kingdom of Bedeiht, but snow did not fall very often even in the winter. Very seldom would it fall continuously for several days, and the snow that did fall would quickly melt the next day if the weather improved.

And yet before winter had even begun, it had snowed. Apparently not even Amelia's father had ever experienced something like this, and Sol expressed anxiety in his letter.

If so much snow fell that there was still some piled up when spring came next year, it would surely affect the farmland.

The next day, Amelia informed Sarge about the harvest as well as the fact that it had snowed in the Lenia domain.

Sarge, who had been satisfied that the synergy between the new grain variety and the new water magic had produced adequate results, shared Amelia's concern about the snow.

"I'd like to go see how the Lenia domain is doing. Would that be all right?"

"Yes. I'm also concerned, so I was planning to go back home for the winter holiday."

At the start of the new year, she and Sarge would be officially engaged. When she became the fiancée of a royal, she wouldn't be able to return home so easily. She wanted to see her parents before that.

Ah, speaking of which...

Amelia remembered that when she had visited the Lenia domain in the summer, she had made cookies with Marie and Meena, and they had promised one another that they would make something else sometime. Julius might not have been able to come with them, but perhaps Marie would.

After getting Sarge's approval, she went to invite Marie, who was overjoyed. Kaid and Meena were coming as well, of course, and hearing that, Julius suggested that he come too. It took some time to coordinate their schedules, but in the end, they arranged things so he could.

"I only have this much freedom while I'm still a student, after all," said Julius, who would be graduating next year; he thanked them for adjusting their plans to accommodate him.

After he graduated, the plan was for him to become the official director of the magical research institute. And before his marriage, there would be some official business he needed to get done as a member of the royal family. He was already so busy now, and it would probably only become more difficult to see him afterwards.

Thus, with the same group of people that had come during the summer holiday, they decided to go to the Lenia domain for winter break. As the month passed, the weather in the capital grew colder. The Lenia domain, which was up north, would likely be even colder. Amelia would have to advise Marie and Meena to pack some heavier clothing.

When the morning of their departure came, snow finally fell on the royal capital as well.

Compared to the Lenia domain, it seemed like the type of fleeting snow that melted quickly, but even so, this was a region where, until just recently, snow had never fallen. Sarge gazed out the carriage window with a serious look on his face the entire journey. He must have been thinking about a lot of things. In an effort not to interrupt him needlessly, she simply watched over him in silence.

Just as they had that summer, they stayed in the village at the halfway point; soon, they would be arriving in the Lenia domain.

As they grew closer to their destination, snow began to fall and pile up on the road. In order not to slip, the carriage slowed down and continued on more cautiously. The inside of the carriage, which lacked heating, grew considerably colder. Amelia shivered, feeling the chill.

What had once been fields of grain had been transformed into a snow-covered expanse.

Seeing the great expanse of white, which stretched as far as she could see, she grew uneasy.

From here on out, what would happen to this kingdom, this continent?

That worry planted itself in her heart as she gazed at the fluttering snowflakes.

“Amelia.”

When someone suddenly called her name, she raised her head to see Sarge sitting across from her, extending a hand. She took his hand without hesitation and allowed him to draw her over to sit next to him.

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her in close to him. His arm around her back was very warm.

That warmth melted away all the worries that had nestled in her heart.

Yeah, everything will be all right.

Even if the weather were to grow harsher, Sarge would be able to do something. And as for Amelia, she would be able to work even harder as long as she was with him.

She genuinely believed that.

Sol and Meena, who had arrived at the manor first, greeted them when they arrived. Marie and Julius would be arriving in the afternoon.

Sol immediately showed them the detailed data he'd recorded, and Amelia and Sarge got to work analyzing it.

“The crop yield here is the highest.”

“Yes, that is the area where you cast earth magic. But instead of the new water magic, enchanted water was sprayed over it, possibly because the magic used wasn't productive enough.”

Amelia's magic skills still had some ways to go, so the magic she'd used must not have reached every recess of the farmlands. That must have been why the areas that had been sprayed with enchanted water had seen more abundant harvests.

“I see. Since it's magic that's just been developed, that's not a problem. It'll keep improving from here on out. More than that, we were able to show the effectiveness of enchanted water. I believe a few samples have been distributed, right?”

“That's right. Safety tests and mass production aren't quite finished yet, so we'll probably have to wait until next year before the kingdom begins selling it in earnest, but my father has given some to his friends.”

Based on the data Sol had shown them earlier, they would have to

figure out what points needed to be further improved upon.

From there, they analyzed the Lenia domain data one point after another and, based on that, discussed the possible improvements and the measures necessary to implement them.

“It’s already evening. May I suggest taking a bit of a break?”

A sudden, soft voice snapped Amelia back to herself.

She looked up at the sound of that unfamiliar voice to see a woman with a kind-looking face and honey-colored hair looking at her with caring eyes.

“Prince Julius and Lady Marie have also arrived. They are waiting in the other room.”

“Um, thank you. I will go and greet them.”

After thanking her, Amelia stood up, prompting Sarge to look up as well.

When Amelia said she was going to go greet Julius and Marie, he nodded, and when he saw the woman she’d been talking to, he raised his voice in surprise. “Liliane?”

“It has been a while, Prince Sarge.”

The image of her kneeling to greet him was at odds with her appearance, which was that of a kind-looking woman in a dress.

She looked almost like a knight.

Female knights often fought with magic, so the mere fact that she was wearing a dress rather than armor didn’t mean she *couldn’t* be a knight.

“What brings you here? Have you come for Kaid?”

“No. I did meet with Kaid, but I actually came here as part of my duty. From now on, I will be working as Lady Amelia’s guard,” she said, then lowered her head in a deep bow.

“Amelia’s guard? Naturally, I feel reassured if it’s you, but has Kaid given his approval?”

“Yes, of course. Kaid and I will be cooperating together.”

Bewildered by the mention of her name, Amelia looked at Sarge.

“Um, Sarge?”

“I didn’t tell you, did I? Since you will be my fiancée, you’ll of course need a personal guard. I couldn’t find anyone suitable, so I hadn’t decided yet, but I have confidence in Liliane.”

Unable to believe that this kind-looking and beautiful woman was to be her bodyguard, Amelia tilted her head quizzically. Sarge introduced her to Amelia.

“This is Liliane Alita, Kaid’s fiancée. She is the only daughter of Marquis Alita and a good friend of my sister-in-law. She is also a former knight.”

So she was a knight. Since she was a “former” knight, she must have been retired currently.

“A good friend of Sophia’s...”

The first time the royal family had offered to assign her a bodyguard, Amelia had declined, feeling it was too much for her, but she would soon officially become the fiancée of a prince. That being the case, Sarge told her that a personal bodyguard would be necessary, no matter that she spent most of her time with him.

Even Amelia knew that she had to accept that.

This woman was a female knight and Kaid’s fiancée. And she was even Crown Princess Sophia’s good friend, so Amelia knew she could trust her.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Amelia. My name is Liliane, and it will be my honor to serve as your knight guard.”

“I’m Amelia. It’s a pleasure to meet you as well.”

When Amelia returned a flustered greeting, Liliane smiled kindly. No matter how Amelia looked at her, Liliane didn’t appear to be anything other than a pure, well-to-do young woman, but according to Sarge, she had been a fairly strong knight.

To stay by Sarge’s side—Amelia didn’t regret that decision.

She had some anxiety about becoming the fiancée of royalty, as she’d expected she would.

But Sophia and Marie would become her sisters-in-law, and someone as kind as Liliane would be with her as her guard. All of Sarge’s brothers were so kind to Amelia as well.

When she’d just arrived in the royal capital, she had been isolated and had had a rough time of it, but now she had been blessed with a circle of friends and could feel happy from the bottom of her heart. She was grateful, but she knew she couldn’t take her happiness for granted, and she resolved once again to support Sarge.

After dinner, the girls gathered to make some sort of confection.

It was Amelia, Marie, and Meena, and this time, Liliane also joined.

“I have lots of apples, so how about we make apple pie?” suggested Meena, placing several apples on the kitchen counter. Apparently they’d been given to her by the villeins when she’d been making her rounds.

Up until last year, Amelia had also been given a lot of apples.

She thought of Reese just a little, but then she immediately remembered the warmth of Sarge’s embrace in the carriage, and her old memories faded.

Just as those troubling thoughts had dissolved, so the days she’d spent with Reese would gradually recede into the past.

“I do like apple pie, but do you really think we can make it?” said Marie as she picked up an apple with an apprehensive look.

“If we all do our best, I’m sure we can!” said Meena, also taking

up an apple, but then she was immediately stymied by the peeler.
“This is hard...”

“Be careful not to cut your hand,” said Liliane, worried, as she, too, picked up an apple.

Since she was a former knight, she must have been fairly used to handling edged tools.

That was what Amelia had been expecting, at any rate, but in reality, Liliane seemed even less skilled at using the peeler than Meena, and after she’d attacked the apple, what remained was mostly the core.

“...How about you, Amelia?”

“Well, I don’t have much experience cooking...”

Marie’s first experience had also been the time they’d made cookies.

“I can’t believe just peeling the apples is such a struggle... I even turned down help, saying we’d be fine and didn’t need any...” said Meena, hanging her head. She must have really been looking forward to making the pie with everyone like this.

After they exchanged glances, wondering what to do, Liliane took the second apple, which she’d also reduced to a core, and put it down on the kitchen counter.

“Please wait just a moment,” she said. She left the room and then shortly returned with her fiancé, Kaid.

He took one look at the apple cores on the counter and the cooking utensils they’d prepared and understood everything at once. He glanced at the downcast girls, picked up an apple, and skillfully peeled it.

“That’s amazing,” Amelia couldn’t help but mutter.

“Knights also have to camp, after all.”

At his answer, Amelia unthinkingly glanced at Liliane, who looked away awkwardly.

“I am actually considerably unskilled in that regard. That’s why I used to always rely on Sir Kaid for that...”

That must have been why she’d gone to get Kaid this time too.

“Don’t worry about it. There are many things that you alone can do, Liliane,” Kaid said gently as he peeled the rest of the apples.

“What are you planning on making?”

“Apple pie.”

Kaid gave a slight nod at Meena’s answer, then entrusted Meena and Liliane with the task of cutting the apples into small pieces and boiling them with sugar. Then he called over Amelia and Marie.

“Making the pie crust dough will be somewhat difficult, but I’ll help out, so let’s try it.”

“Yes, I’ll do my best,” said Marie, nodding.

Amelia also responded, "Me too!"

Just as he'd said, making the dough was hard work.

Kaid took care of the work that required some strength, but then they had to let the dough chill and rest, so they would have to complete the pie tomorrow.

"I've always eaten apple pie without a thought, but it's quite difficult to make, actually," said Marie. Amelia agreed with her, nodding deeply.

"I never knew how much work went into making it."

They'd also boiled the apples successfully, so it seemed like they would make it in time for tomorrow's tea time.

The next day, just like the day before, Amelia looked over the new water magic data with Sarge. However, she was anxious about their plans to bake the apple pie, so she would occasionally stop in the middle of what they were doing.

Noticing that, Liliane took Amelia away, saying she seemed tired and ought to rest.

"I'm sorry, I..."

Amelia felt sad that she wasn't able to focus on Sarge's important research.

However, Liliane gently reasoned with her.

"Of course Prince Sarge's research is incredibly important, but I believe it is more important that you have many different experiences. There are many things that you can only do now. I believe those things will become vital to your personal growth."

"Different experiences..."

When she thought of it, she realized that when she'd been living at home, she had done nothing but make her rounds of the farmland and record data.

She had only participated in a handful of tea parties.

She'd never gone out with friends.

"Besides reading books, what sorts of things do you like to do, Lady Amelia?"

She tried to think.

"...I enjoy making pastries with everyone. Other than that...I like dancing. And I think I like shopping too."

"There are also things you can only do as a student. Your experiences are your assets, you know."

Now that someone had put it to her in those terms, Amelia also felt it would be good for her to make the most of her student life.

"You're right. I want to try to have more experiences."

Afterwards, the girls gathered together and finally baked the apple pie.

They lit a fire in the oven and, once it was warm, put their pie in

to bake.

The result was even better than they had been anticipating, so much so that they all exclaimed happily when it came out of the oven.

They carefully cut it and brought it to each of their respective fiancés.

Amelia brought a slice of the freshly baked apple pie back to Sarge.

Sarge was alone, immersed in reading a document, but when Amelia arrived, he noticed and looked up at her.

“What’s that, Amelia?”

“We made cookies last time, so this time we tried making an apple pie. If you’d like, please try some.”

“Ahh, is this what you’ve been working on since yesterday?”

Sarge gladly took the slice of apple pie from Amelia. Amelia was also happy to see him so delighted with what they had worked so hard to make.

“It was really fun making this with everyone. I’d like to try making other things as well.”

She wanted to experience many different things.

When she shared what she’d been thinking, Sarge agreed.

“That’s right. There are so many things one needs to experience. Coming here made me realize that very well. Let’s experience lots of things and use those experiences for the good of the country.”

“Yes!”

The two of them ate the freshly baked apple pie. Afterwards, they decided to go on a walk outside. Accompanied by Kaid and Liliane, they strolled through the snow-covered farmland.

Snowflakes fluttered down softly like feathers.

The temperature had dropped even further from the time they’d arrived, so it was likely the snow wouldn’t melt for a while and would continue to pile up.

The threats surrounding the kingdom were slowly getting worse.

But she believed they’d be able to do something as long as they didn’t give up.

In order to prepare herself, she would continue to experience and learn many different things.

As long as the two of us are together, I’m sure we can overcome anything.

Amelia looked up at Sarge walking next to her and smiled.

Afterword

Hello, this is Micoto Sakurai.

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of *A Royal Rebound: Forget My Ex-Fiancé, I'm Being Pampered by the Prince!*

This novel was originally published online. Even more people than I was anticipating read the novel as it was being serialized, and thus, I was able to have it printed like this. It's all thanks to my readers. Let me take this opportunity to once again express my gratitude to everyone who kept up with the serialization. Thank you very much.

I'm also very honored to be involved with the new label DRE Novels. This novel was revised for publication and includes a newly written extra story, so I think even those who read the novel online will be able to enjoy this edition. Thank you to my editor, who was such a great help during the process of revision.

They courteously pointed out discrepancies and grammatical errors, so even though the work is not yet perfect, I think it has developed quite a lot.

The beautiful illustrations in this work were done by Kuroyuki-sensei.

From the moment I received the character designs, I was so moved by the beautiful illustrations, which matched my vision of the characters so well. Thank you for breathing life into my characters.

It has also been decided that this work will be adapted into a manga. I don't know all the details yet, but I'm looking forward to it. I hope you all enjoy that as well.

Also, this series will continue, so I would be happy if you kept an eye out for future installments too.

Finally, I give my thanks from the bottom of my heart to everyone who picked up this book.

I hope we meet again somewhere.

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A Royal Rebound: Forget My Ex-Fiancé, I'm Being Pampered by
the Prince! Volume 1
by Micoto Sakurai

Translated by A.M. Cola
Edited by Shakuzan

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Original Japanese edition published in 2022 by Drecom Co., Ltd.
This English edition is published in arrangement with Drecom Co.,
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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2023
Premium E-Book for